

A DELL BOOK

DELL

249

LIDA
LARRIMORE

Stars Still Shine



WITH MAP ON BACK COVER



STARS STILL SHINE

Persons this *Love Story* is about—

KATHLEEN MILLER,

Beautiful and lovely to look at, has striking Irish eyes and golden curls. Forbidden by her father to have dates with college students, Kathleen has lately come to resent her seemingly humdrum existence outside the college world of Don Alexander, since that night last spring when he probably saved her life—and her reputation.

DON ALEXANDER,

a law student at the college, is tall, dark, and good-looking in a well-bred sort of way. The mere mention or sight of him is enough to make Kathleen's heart turn cartwheels.

JOE REGAN,

a prep school football player with All-American possibilities, has turned down an opportunity to obtain athletic glory and a college education in order to work in the flower shop owned by Kathleen's father. Joe is smart, ambitious, fun-loving, but Kathleen cannot imagine herself settling down to marrying him, even though such a move would please her father.

MOTHER MILLER,

Kathleen's easy-going, jolly mother, seldom worries or fusses and takes things as they come. Her home is usually cluttered and dusty and noisy, but there is never a lack of affection.

DAD MILLER,

whose life is his family and his flower shop, is suspicious of education and leisure and wealth. He is devoted to his wife and makes no effort to curb her incongruous tastes or lively spirits.

MRS. JEROME ALEXANDER,

Don's slender and beautiful mother, is unusually expert in directing his ambitions and social activities. Her person is enough to remind Don of his family position and social obligations.

JOAN THAYER,

an attractive, poised, carelessly confident debutante, belongs to Don's world. She is subtly possessive of Don.

HILDA MILLER,

Kathleen's older and practically humorless sister, has developed a single-track mind in an effort to improve herself. She has never given her natural assets of lovely figure and long, graceful legs a thought. Nevertheless she resents being regarded as an old maid by her family.

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STARS STILL SHINE

Persons this *Love Story* is about—cont.

ROSE AND CLIFF WEAVER,

Kathleen's sister and brother-in-law, have come home with their two youngsters for a prolonged "visit." Rose has her mother's amiability and a wifely admiration for Cliff's "tall tales."

BUD MILLER,

16 and energetic, is Kathleen's ruddy-faced, sturdy young brother. Bud helps out in his father's flower shop.

"DING" HARRISON,

better known socially as John Fielding Harrison, the fifth, is envied by Don because he has the courage to plan his own life.

THELMA,

a friendly, generous girl, has been Kathleen's best friend through high school. She helps Kathleen carry out her plans with Don.

MISS JENNINGS,

who "does for" the Millers on gala occasions, is a fluttery woman whose inevitable pink dust cap gives her the appearance of a sparrow dressed for a masquerade.

STARS STILL SHINE

What this *Love Story* is about—

When Don Alexander, a handsome law student, walks into her father's flower shop, pretty Kathleen Miller's first wild hope is that he won't remember her. He couldn't, she knows, have been thinking of her constantly, as she has of him, since that night of tragedy last May when she, like Cinderella, went running home, without having the foresight to drop a slipper as she fled. She had been tongue-tied and frightened. The girls Don remembered were smooth and poised, like his week-end guest, Joan Thayer, bright creatures from a world unfamiliar to her, his world, the world of the college in which she has no share—in which she is forbidden to share. But Don does remember Kathleen and asks her for a date. It is with mixed emotions that she accepts. Feeling guilty and disloyal to her family, Kathleen arranges to meet Don secretly. And that is the beginning of a romance which seems destined, almost from the first, to end in confusion and heartbreak.

Don Alexander, of impeccable social background, belongs to a way of life which includes no part for Kathleen Miller, one of a noisy, affectionate, middle-class Irish family. "The Alexanders," Dad Miller said, "may sow a wild oat or two in their youth, but when it comes to marriage, they must choose their own kind." In his own way, where his family is concerned, Dad is as adamant as the Alexanders. "College boys are up to no good chasing town girls," Dad often warned. He forbade any dating with them. His daughters were to go with their own kind. That was the only way to avoid heartbreak. Dad's idea of Kathleen's own kind was Joe Regan who worked in the Miller flower shop. And Kathleen had once been thrilled by big, jolly, Irish Joe who had given up a college education and athletic glory

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STARS STILL SHINE

What this *Love Story* is about—cont.

because he scorned to ride a gravy train. But Kathleen has her heart set upon a higher goal than the adoring Joe.

Deeply in love with Don, Kathleen believes that she can break away from her middle-class environment, that she can make herself over into Don's kind of girl. She is reckoning, however, without her own deep-set loyalties and ideals.

As time goes on, Kathleen is torn between her gnawing fear that she may be no more than Don's wild oat and her desire to be accepted by Don's world and to have him accepted by her world. Her sense of foreboding grows when she meets Don's mother, whose surface friendliness and tact are more intimidating than open hostility.

Kathleen has a great deal of growing to do before she can be true to her own ideals and finally come to know the kind of happiness she wants for herself.

Stars Still Shine is a tender love story both heart-warming and exciting as it builds to a stirring emotional climax.

STARS STILL SHINE

By LIDA LARRIMORE

Author of "Robin Hill,"
"The Wagon and the Star,"
"The Silver Flute," etc.

Author's Dedication
For CHARLES and DICK
Who Saw It Through

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STARS STILL SHINE

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Stars Still Shine

Chapter One

LIKE THE LITTLE MERMAID

IT WAS HAPPENING just as she'd hoped and planned, a dream coming true, complete and perfect in every detail. It made you believe very firmly in God and heaven, in guardian angels with hovering wings. She'd known, deep in her heart, that he would come. This second meeting was written in the stars as the first had been. Impossible not to believe that both had been competently arranged long, long before she was born. The luck of the Irish, Mother would probably call it. But luck struck like lightning and skittered away, seldom seeing a thing clear through. Besides, she was only part Irish. No, this, his being here, wasn't luck. It was part of a beautiful plan—

She had imagined it happening just this way. Through the spring, after that night in May, through the summer and early fall, she'd thought of it almost constantly. It had provided material for daydreams, for last drowsily exciting thoughts before she fell asleep at night. Walking from home to the shop or back, seated beside Joe in the movies or dancing with him at Silver Lake Park, evenings on the porch with the family all around, she had pictured this scene so vividly that the dream seemed real and reality a sort of half-waking dream—

Sometime, so in fancy she'd planned, the bell which rang when the shop door opened would tinkle its summons. She would walk out into the shop and he would be there. He might have stopped in on an errand, not knowing that she was there. It was possible that he might not recognize her just at first. She was prepared for, had planned for that. She would refer to their

previous meeting, simply, naturally, thanking him for his kindness. He would remember, then. Whatever he had thought of her, he would see her differently, not frightened and humiliated as she had been that night, too miserable to respond to his efforts to put her at ease, but poised and gracious and friendly, looking nice in the rose-colored smock against a background of flowers—

But now that he was here, she wasn't prepared. The shock of his actual presence was as overwhelming as though she hadn't dreamed and planned, as though it hadn't occurred to her that she might see him again. She realized, now, how nearly she'd given up expecting him, except deep down under reasoning and conscious thought, in that secret place beyond the reach of disappointments. The dream, vivid and exciting during the summer, had faded in the weeks since the college had reopened.

She hadn't let herself believe that he hadn't returned. She'd watched and waited, looking for him in groups of students she passed on the streets, darting glances at cars that passed, making excuses to stop in at the drugstore and the Chocolate Shop. She'd persuaded Thelma or Ruthie to walk with her, after supper while the light was still clear, up past the campus and along Fraternity Row, pretending the direction she'd chosen was accidental, but watchful and alert beneath assumed indifference. Here at the shop she'd started up each time the bell rang, so eager and tense that Dad had noticed and asked questions. And then she had called his fraternity house—

Besides, today of all days! They were terribly rushed because of the game this afternoon, the alumni dinners, the dance tonight. She'd been here at the shop since seven o'clock, making up orders as fast as she could. There'd been a steady stream of customers until this past half-hour. Now that it was nearly game time, the crowds

had thinned from the streets and the shop was empty. She had planned that he should come when she looked her best. She didn't, now. Her smock was splattered, her hands were stained green and her nails were grubby. She hadn't had time to use a lipstick or powder her nose all day and her hair must be simply wild—

But he was here, suddenly, unexpectedly, making her heart turn cart wheels and her breath catch in her throat. He did not see her. The swinging door closed noiselessly and her steps made no sound on the waxed linoleum floor. He stood half-turned from her, looking at the display case, tall, as she had remembered him, wearing his handsome clothes as though he was so accustomed to them that he never gave them a thought, dark and good-looking in the well-bred way she liked best, older than most of the college boys because he was in law school, Sunshine, streaming in through the wide west window, fell full upon him. She stood in shadow against the door, still with a tense and terrible stillness, unable to speak or to move.

He was growing impatient at the delay. He opened and closed a metal case, dropped it into his pocket, tapped the end of a cigarette against his thumb. In a moment he would turn. He would see her and speak to her, expect her to reply. Panic shook her so that she trembled. Her instinct was to run away, to slip back into the workroom and hide until he had gone. Now, in this instant before he turned, the dream was complete and perfect, hers to keep forever as long as she lived. If he spoke and she answered— If the scene she had planned went wrong— If she'd been silly and childish thinking their first meeting had any especial significance, that his being here meant—

But May Hinkle, who helped out on rush days, was in the workroom and would certainly ask questions. Perhaps he wouldn't remember. Perhaps he hadn't thought

of her since he'd left her at the corner that night last May, when the clock on the chapel was striking twelve and she, like Cinderella, had gone running home without having the foresight to drop off a slipper as she fled. He couldn't have thought of her constantly as she had thought of him. His life, from all she had learned through carefully indirect questions, the college weekly, the city papers, was full and varied and interesting. Probably cutting in on a girl at a roadhouse, dancing with her once and taking her home was not an unusual experience.

She hoped he wouldn't remember her. It hardly seemed likely that he would. She'd been tongue-tied and frightened, hardly, she thought, even adequately polite. The girls he remembered were smooth and poised—the girls who came to town for house-party week-ends, the girls who were coming to town today, bright creatures from a world unfamiliar to her, his world, the world of the college in which she had no share. She hoped—

He turned. He had seen her.

"Can you make me two corsages?" he asked.

He didn't remember. His voice was courteous but faintly annoyed. He scarcely looked at her. His glance, turning again to the display case, was hurried and impersonal. Disappointment filled her mind and her heart, crowding out other emotions. She'd thought she was prepared for this. In her most confident anticipations she hadn't expected him to recognize her immediately. She'd told herself, just a moment ago, that she hoped he wouldn't remember—

But she wasn't prepared and what she had told herself was a black and shameless lie. She must have expected, have hoped at least, that he would know her at once. She couldn't feel like this unless she had thought he would remember—

"Yes— Of course," she said. Was that her voice? It sounded thin and faint, like an echo, coming from far away. She took a tentative step, not trusting her knees. They obeyed commands. Somewhat reassured, she walked from shadow into sunlight, moved slowly toward him across the black and white squares in the floor. "What," she asked, "would you like?"

"Gardenias, for one, perhaps. Or small pale pink roses. Haven't you anything except chrysanthemums?"

"There isn't much left, I'm afraid."

He was a stranger. That made everything wrong. In her thoughts he had become an intimate companion. They had driven together in his car, starting off in the afternoon, stopping for dinner somewhere, coming home in a wash of moonlight. They had danced to her favorite tunes, which were his favorites, too, in vague and delightful settings which eluded definite description. They had sat, shoulders touching, in the stadium at football games, in the movies, at the theater in the city. They had faced each other, through dim and becoming light, across dozens of tables for two. She had met his mother and his friends. "Kathleen Miller. Isn't she lovely! Don is crazy about her—"

But none of that was real. Watching him as he stood, half-turned from her again, unaware of her very existence, impatient to conclude an errand and be on his way, she knew that she wouldn't refer to their previous meeting. The set little speeches she had rehearsed, repeating them over and over until she knew them by heart, seemed stiff and awkward, even presuming. She imagined, with bracing self-ridicule, how he would reply to such an obvious bid for his attention. "That's very flattering. But aren't you confusing me with someone else, Tyrone Power, perhaps?" How *could* she have thought—

Well, she knew now. This was the end of the dream.

She could laugh at herself, but disappointment remained, a lost and desolate feeling, too achingly real to be dismissed by ridicule. She glanced past him, grateful for his preoccupation. She needed a little time for readjustment. Being dropped smack into reality from the floating bubble of a dream was unnerving. If he didn't speak to her for a moment— If, for a moment longer, his attention remained fixed upon the flowers—

She looked out into the street through the glass panels in the door. His car was parked at the curb, the long tan roadster she remembered. The top was folded back as it had been that night last spring. A girl sat where she had sat, leaning against the leather upholstery, waiting for him. The girl wore a brown fur coat and a green suede hat with a bronze feather through the high peaked crown. Only her profile was visible, a straight nose, full brightly painted lips, a chin, a long white throat, waves of red-brown hair—

She was beautiful. You knew that by the carelessly confident way she sat in the car, by her apparent indifference to the glances of people who passed. You knew she belonged to his world by the tilt of the crazy hat, the sheen of the rich dark fur. She lived in a lovely house, probably, with a butler and maids and a bathroom all her own. She'd been to a school where she'd been taught to be graceful and confident. She'd traveled and had a debutante party. She'd never been frightened and awkward. She hadn't been forced to imagine a friendship because she was lonely and nothing exciting seemed likely to happen to her, because she hated her humdrum life and the pig-in-the-parlor way her family lived—

He was speaking to her. She turned and he broke off abruptly, stood looking at her with an intent and puzzled expression. Her heart did a cart wheel again. He seemed to be trying to remember. She helped him, silently, wish-

ing as hard as she could.

Then the guardian angels swooped lower, attending to business again. His expression cleared. His dark eyes sharpened with recognition. He smiled and removed his hat.

"Hello," he said.

"Hello," she said and breathed again, a long satisfied, satisfying breath.

"You're—" he began and paused, still looking at her intently.

"Kathleen Miller," she said.

"You didn't tell me your name."

"You didn't ask."

"Very careless of me. You remember me, then?"

"I remember. You're Don Alexander. You brought me back to town from Mike's place one night last spring."

"A good job, too. Kathleen," he repeated. "Are you sure? Only your eyes look Irish."

His tone implied a compliment. His intent and interested expression reminded her that her eyes were a dark violet blue with long curled dark lashes. She was reminded of other assets, too. Her hair was nice, pale gold, thick and soft, grown out to a shoulder length bob. She wished she'd had it done at the beauty shop, though, in curls over her forehead. It didn't look very smart just brushed back behind her ears—

He glanced away from her, around the shop, then back to her again.

"Miller—?" he asked. "This must be your father's shop."

"Yes—" His skin was darker than she remembered. Last spring it was pale tan, the color of a pheasant's egg. He must have spent the summer in the sun. There was a small scar under his left eye. You noticed it when he smiled.

"But I've been coming in here for years. Where were

you?"

"In grammar school and then in high. I graduated last June. I've been helping Dad here since then."

"I've wondered—" He didn't seem hurried and impatient, now. He stood smiling at her as though he had all the time in the world. Her confidence increased. She felt excited but almost entirely at ease, as she'd expected to feel when he came, as in the dream she had planned.

"I've thought of you," he said, after a moment. "That next day—when I heard what had happened to the others." The smile faded from his eyes and he spoke more slowly. "The girl—died?"

"Yes—" She hoped May wasn't listening in the work-room back there. But no, of course she couldn't hear. She'd turned the radio on to listen for a broadcast of the game. The voice of the announcer made a humming screen of sound, low, but effective. Dad and Joe had gone to the college gymnasium. Matt was with them, she thought. Bud was delivering orders. If only they didn't come blundering in—

"And both boys were hurt," he continued. "Young Bailey and Tommy Hughes—"

She nodded, unable to speak. She tried not to think of the tragedy she had so miraculously escaped. She'd tried, all through the summer, to bury distressing memories under happier thoughts, dancing with him, driving home in his car, finding that the window over the kitchen porch hadn't been locked so that she was able to reach her room without attracting attention. But sometimes the thought of what might have happened pushed through, forcing her to remember.

"I wanted to find you," he said. "I hadn't much to go on. I didn't know your name or where you lived. You had me put you off at the Baptist church corner. Remember? I asked Mike but he wouldn't admit there was a second girl in the party."

"He—he wouldn't have known me," she said. "I hadn't been there—before that night."

"Yes, I know. You told me then. I didn't want to involve you by asking too many questions. Was it known that you were with the others?"

"No—" she said faintly.

"I hoped not. I would have found you. But I was called home. My father died that same week."

"I know. I was sorry."

"Thank you. I went away with my mother afterward, Banff and Lake Louise. Then down into California to visit my sister."

"That's why you weren't here, then? Earlier, when college opened this fall?"

"Checking up on me, were you? Were you afraid I would tell? I might have blackmailed you, of course. It didn't occur to me. I might have forced you to support me for the rest of my life. Well, it's too late, now. I have no talent for finance."

He was smiling again, talking nonsense to make nightmare thoughts less frightful. He must sense how recalling the tragedy made her feel. Perhaps remembered fright was reflected, now, in her face. It was a relief to talk of it, though. She hadn't, not to anyone. She hadn't dared say a word in Evvie's defense. She had listened in guilty silence to the scandal and talk, the comments her family made, whispering among the girls at school—

"I looked for you," she said hesitantly. "When college opened—I hoped I would see you. I wanted to thank you."

"Thank me?" His brows lifted. "Why?"

"Because—" she began and paused. Then, forced by conviction to express what she felt, she made a second attempt. "Because," she continued, "you probably saved my life."

"Oh, come now—" He laughed.

She felt her cheeks flushing and looked away.

"But it's true," she insisted with soft vehemence. "I might have been killed as Evvie was. There'd have been the talk and fuss, anyway." Her eyes lifted. "If you hadn't—" She paused, surprised and confused by his altered expression.

"No, you can't laugh it off entirely, can you?" he asked. "I've thought of it a good deal. There must be something that shapes our destinies. That sounds pretty solemn, but there you are. Nothing like that ever happened to me. I've felt fairly competent to manage my own affairs. But I don't know. I had a Scotch-Irish nurse when I was a kid. She used to tell me the course my life would take was already written in the stars."

She gave a soft exclamation.

"You believe that, too?" His expression was half-serious, half-amused. "I wouldn't count on it," he advised. "Nana's theories were picturesque but not always sound. A combination of Scotch Presbyterian and Irish mystic produces amazing results. But it did happen, didn't it? We can't get away from the fact. I wasn't intentionally heroic. It was just that— Well, I'd been watching you all evening. I had an idea that you wanted to get away from your party, so I cut in. You looked frightened and so pretty. I suppose my chivalrous instincts were aroused. If you hadn't looked like the little mermaid—Nana was conscientious about fairy tales. My sister and I were brought up on Hans Christian Andersen. Let's call it a sentimental gesture. I don't like solemn thoughts about destiny. You reminded me of the little mermaid so I took you home. There. Will that do?"

She smiled and then was grave again. "But I was—I am really very grateful," she said quickly. "I wanted to tell you."

"And you have. I think I'll want you to tell me again, though."

She glanced up, a question in her eyes.

"Some evening when we're dancing," he said.

"Are we—will we be dancing?"

"Often. If you'd like to. I would."

"Then you're going to stay—here at college, I mean?"

"There seems to be no alternative. I have more than a year's work to make up before I take bar exams."

"I thought maybe you'd come for the game."

"The game!" He consulted the watch on his wrist.

"It's past game time now. How long have I been here?" He looked at her.

"Not long—"

"What was it I asked for when I came in?" he asked in pretended bewilderment. "There must have been something. I didn't know you were here."

She smiled.

"Two corsages," she said.

"Oh, yes. Gardenias for my mother. Have you anything suitable for a very beautiful young lady with red hair and sea-green eyes? It will have to be something special because I've kept her waiting."

"Orchids—?" she suggested.

"Oh, good Lord, no! She's quite allergic to shades of purple."

"These are small spotted brown ones. They came by mistake with an order. We don't usually have them on hand."

"The kind that look like tree toads? Do you like them?"

"No—"

"Neither do I. The young lady who's waiting does. She thinks they're amusing. Let me see them."

His figure and hers were reflected dimly in the glass front of the display case. Did she look like that, so excited, so shining, so pretty? Her cheeks were flushed to a more delicate shade than the rose colored smock. Her

hair curled in pale gold feathers against her temples.
Her eyes were soft and bright and very blue—
The little mermaid? Hans Christian Andersen?
She wished she knew the story.

Chapter Two

FEELING GUILTY AND DISLOYAL

KATHLEEN FOLDED IN THE TOP LAYER of waxed green paper and fitted the lid on the box. This was the last length of ribbon she would cut from the spool today. She had worked with flying fingers through the afternoon, too excited to be conscious of weariness, dreamily preoccupied, only half hearing May Hinkle's chatter and the radio broadcast of the game. Now that she had come to the end, she realized she was tired. Her hands shook, making a difficult task of tying the last gauze bow.

The sun had disappeared and the bulbs in dangling green shades were lit. She was alone in the warm, steamy workroom which was part greenhouse as well. May had gone home for supper. Dad and Joe were still at the college gymnasium, she supposed, decorating for the dance. Bud was making a third round of deliveries and would be obliged to make a fourth. Matt had rushed in some time ago and put through a phone call to the city. The yellow chrysanthemums hadn't arrived, he told someone at the other end of the wire. Only white ones, and did they think it was a wake?

She had only the tags left to write. Kathleen set the glossy box beside a second box not yet marked with a name and address. The long zinc-covered table was littered with damp stems, leaves, wilting petals, snips of ribbon, bits of fern. She cleared off a space and mopped it dry, reached for tags, the pen in its glass of shot, the bottle of ink.

Mrs. Jerome Alexander, she wrote on the tag, taking pains with the letters. She was glad he hadn't been named for his father. He'd have been called "Jerry."

though. You couldn't imagine him with an elderly and dignified name like Jerome. She liked Donald better, and Don best of all. Donald Grant Alexander. It sounded Scotch but she wasn't sure. There was a Donald in "The Lady of the Lake."

She wondered if he looked like his mother as she wrote *The College Inn* under the name. Was she tall and slender with dark eyes and that smooth pale tan skin? He had spoken of her affectionately when he had selected the gardenias. She was certain to be young looking and beautifully dressed, like movie mothers of handsome young sons, like some of the mothers who came for Commencement and games. She would wear black because her husband had died last May, thin floaty black, or velvet, perhaps with pearls, real ones, in a long double strand. Well, the gardenias would be nice.

Kathleen attached the tag to the box and selected another. She didn't need to consult the memorandum she'd made. The name had been repeating itself over and over in her mind all the afternoon. *Miss Joan Thayer*. She hadn't liked being kept waiting. Kathleen, hiding behind ferns and palms in the window, had caught a glimpse of her face as Don joined her in the car. He'd have some explaining to do, she'd thought. Not that explaining would be any trouble for him. His voice and his manner—what was it Mother said?—would charm the birds from the trees.

Joan. Joan Thayer. It was a cool-sounding name. She wondered how long and how intimately Don had known her. Was she just a party girl? Or was he seriously attached to her? Bringing her here with his mother made it seem a family arrangement. He had referred to her lightly enough, making joking remarks about the orchids that looked like toads. You couldn't tell by that. It was his way to be teasing and casual. On the surface, at least. He could be serious, though. He'd understood how

she'd felt when she thanked him. He hadn't been able to laugh off what had happened last spring.

Maybe she was just a girl he'd always known. Maybe they'd played together in Rittenhouse Square when they were kids while their nurses watched them from those green benches along the paths. Maybe they'd gone to dancing school together and had just drifted into being friends. Nonsense, Kathleen told herself. That girl with the red-brown hair wouldn't be satisfied with just being friends, for all her cool-sounding name.

She wished someone would come, Dad or one of the boys. Kathleen wandered about the workroom, tired, but too restless to be still, her nerves as taut as fiddle strings from excitement and weariness.

The telephone rang. She sprang to snatch the receiver from the hook. She didn't know what she expected that her heart should suddenly beat like sticks tapping against a drum. But it was only Mother again, hinting at a surprise, wanting to know when she and Dad and Bud would be home. Cliff and the kids were getting hungry. Besides, she'd fixed pot roast with dumplings and nothing would be fit to eat if she couldn't dish up soon.

Pot roast! Kathleen clicked the receiver on the hook. She was supposed to get excited about dumplings for supper! Well, that was her life. She sat again on the stool under the light, propped her elbow on the table, rested her cheek in the palm of her hand. You couldn't help loving Mother, though. She was so easygoing and jolly, as full of fun and jokes as a girl. Mother enjoyed life. Each day was filled with adventures which she told at supper, indignant at times, showing flashes of temper, more often laughing until her plump pink cheeks shook and her blue eyes narrowed with mirth.

Mother seldom worried or fussed. Her tempers were like a summer storm, a flashy display, then over and the sun shining again. She took things as they came. What

wasn't done today would, by some miracle, be accomplished tomorrow. The miracle never happened, of course, so that the house Dad had built with such pride was usually cluttered and dusty, especially now that Rose and Cliff and the kids were there. Oh, it was comfortable enough. Mother was a grand cook. They weren't really poor, though the business was seasonal. Matt was doing well with the bulbs. There was no lack, she thought, ashamed of the irritation she felt, except privacy and order, the small elegancies for which she longed.

She couldn't remember when she hadn't felt that particular lack. She'd been a dainty and fastidious child. "Look at her!" Mother would say, not without pride, when, at the table, she demanded a clean napkin or a thin glass for her milk or refused a slice of bread spread thickly with butter and jam in Mother's lavish way. "The airs she takes to herself make me wonder if she's my child at all. She's trying to copy Hilda, and her knee-high to a strawberry plant. Well, it's a poor house that can't boast one lady, they say. But how will we make out with two?"

Hilda was six years older than she, fair as she was fair, with quiet and orderly habits and a critical attitude toward the family less yielding than her own. Hilda had left home as soon as she could. She'd gone on to business school from high and had a job with a law firm in the city, now. She had her own small apartment, too, blessedly tidy and neat, with a tiny kitchenette and furniture she was buying piece by piece for herself. She *had* copied Hilda and tried to be like her. When she was younger, she'd thought Hilda was wonderful. She'd thought, then, that to live with Hilda and have a job of her own would be grand.

Now she didn't know. Her feeling for Hilda had changed. She didn't know when she had begun to notice that Hilda's manners seemed studied and a little too

plain and precise. She tried so hard to speak correctly that she sounded like exercises in a grammar. Her life had come to seem dreary, too, just working all day, cooking supper on the gas ring in the kitchenette, toiling over her clothes at night, or reading "improving" books. When she went out for fun it was usually with other girls who worked in offices. They'd have supper at a tearoom and go window shopping along Chestnut Street or stop in at a movie if her budget permitted. That budget with a capital B! Hilda spoke of it as though it was a person, a domineering relative who ruled with a rod of iron.

What would Don Alexander think of Hilda? If she aired those little affectations she'd learned from books of etiquette. What would he think of the others, of Dad and Mother and Rose and Cliff and Bud and Matt and the kids? She knew very well and the knowledge depressed her. Sighing, she reached across the table and turned a knob on the radio.

Dance music came softly into the room. The melody was familiar. Dad used to play it on his violin. Oh yes, of course, it was "The Blue Danube." Lovely, lilting melody. She dropped her head on her arms to close out familiar surroundings.

One, two, three— One, two, three— He was as tall as Joe. Her cheek would rest against his shoulder. She would be obliged to draw away and look up to meet his eyes. One, two, three— One, two, three— She waltzed with Don Alexander in pink tulle sprinkled with silver stars under the draped beams of the college gymnasium. One, two, three— One, two, three— Lovely melody. Lovely night. Kathie—Don—

A door closed and steps sounded startlingly near. She raised her head and saw that Dad had returned.

"Hello!" she said, feeling as guilty as though he could read her thoughts. She snapped off the waltz music hur-

ricdly and slipped down from the stool

"Well, Kathie," Dad said. "You're still here."

"Just waiting for someone to come. Have you finished at the gym?"

"Joe and Matt are still there." Dad came into the circle of light. She couldn't remember when his broad shoulders hadn't been stooped from bending over cold frames and seedlings or when his weathered red-brown skin hadn't had the texture of leather. He'd been tall and straight and fine-looking in his youth. Mother had pictures to prove it. His hair, mixed with gray now, had been as fair as her own and his eyes were still a clear light blue. "You're like Dad's family," Mother often told her. "They were all slim and light complected. If you hadn't those Irish eyes you'd look no kin to me at all."

"Did the rest of the order come, Dad? Matt telephoned."

"Just came." Dad took out his pipe and tobacco pouch. His hands were well-shaped, though roughened and stiff, with long fingers blunt at the tips. She liked Dad's hands. They had something. Character, perhaps.

"Joe and Matt are finishing up," Dad continued when he had filled his pipe. "Any more orders for Bud?"

"All of these. He should be here soon. You won't need me any longer?"

"No. You've had a long day. But I don't like you to walk home alone this late."

"Why, Dad!" She laughed as she went over to the hand basin in the corner and switched on a light. "It isn't even dark yet. I don't mind."

"But after a game. Too many young fools getting tight. I don't like it."

"I'll run every step of the way." She laughed again but she was conscious of a familiar resentment. Dad's attitude toward the college seemed ridiculous. He depended upon student activities, upon the students them-

selves for his business but he forbade any mingling with them in a friendly way. That attitude was not a recent development. She remembered when Rose was in high school, Rose had been handsome, then, a big girl with Mother's high color and curly dark hair, good-natured and full of fun. Rose had attracted attention. She, herself, was ten years younger but she remembered more than one violent family scene. She hadn't known, then, what Dad meant when he told Rose that the college boys were up to no good chasing town girls and she was to go with her own kind. She hadn't known exactly but she had resented, even then, the idea that her family was different, inferior, there to serve the college but not to be included in the activities it created.

The parents of her friends felt toward the college as Dad did. Kathleen snapped on the light beside the mirror above the hand basin. They were right, perhaps, she admitted. Not because of what had happened to Evvie, though. Evvie, with her wild ways and pert dark prettiness, had been headed for trouble. It wasn't Evvie's fault altogether. There'd been something furtive and vaguely frightening in the atmosphere of the small house at the far end of College Avenue where Evvie lived with her mother. Evvie's mother demonstrated face creams and toilet preparations and, though she didn't seem to work at it very hard, she was smartly dressed and went away a good deal leaving Evvie with a colored maid named Estelle. She had left town after Evvie's death last spring and Mother, among others, had said it was "good riddance to bad rubbish."

Yes, Evvie had been headed for trouble. It was probably only a coincidence that she'd been with boys from the college the night of the accident. Evvie ran around with town boys, too, and older men from out of town and Nick Donato who owned the poolroom.

But there were other instances—

They didn't concern her, certainly. This was no time for recalling dreary stories she'd heard. No time for thinking at all. Excitement hummed through her in tingling vibrations, making scattered bright fragments of thought. She removed her smock, hung it on a hook, took down her coat and hat. A restless desire for activity animated her movements until she stood before the mirror again. She was quiet, then, still but intent, absorbed in speculations. Forgetting that Dad was there, she gazed lingeringly at her reflection in the rectangle of glass.

She was pretty, she thought, running a comb through her hair, watching springy tendrils settle in ringlets against her temples. He thought she was pretty. She had that in her favor, at least. A blessing it was, too, since there was so much that she lacked. "If you hadn't looked like the little mermaid—"

The mirror was dim and had a greenish tinge. She had complained of it often enough since she'd been working at the shop. Now she didn't mind. She saw her face as though it was under water, the delicate coloring blurred, her eyes dark and misted, a smile trembling across her lips. *Ich weiss nicht was soll es bedeuten*. That was the Lorelei, though, a siren who sat on a rock and lured sailors to destruction. He wouldn't have cut in on her and brought her home. He'd have known she could take care of herself. Besides, the Lorelei would probably have enjoyed that evening at Mike's—

She had reminded him of a story he'd liked as a child. Remembering that pleased her and gave her confidence. Perhaps what she lacked wouldn't seem important to him. Perhaps, just *perhaps*, he was fed-up with girls who thought brown orchids were amusing, with girls who were smooth and poised and knew all the answers. Smiling dreamily, she brightened the curve of her lips and powdered her nose.

Dad's voice reminded her of his presence. He was

speaking to her. She turned from the mirror.

"What?" she asked absently. "I'm sorry—I didn't hear—"

"I said, can't you wait until you get home for that?"

"For what?"

"The trimmings. That lipstick and stuff. It's better you shouldn't call attention to the way you look."

Dad's voice was gruff but kindly, too. He intended what he had said for a compliment. He paid them very rarely. She knew that she was his favorite, that she was more precious to him than the others, though he seldom expressed his feeling in words. Mother's affection spilled over in endearments but Dad didn't talk a great deal. Sometimes he touched her hair or her hand or drew her down to the arm of his chair. Often she found him looking at her, as he looked at her now, with love and pride and grave concern mingled in his expression. She sensed that he was afraid for her because she was young and pretty and had ideas different from his own. She resented that concern but was moved by it. Feeling guilty and disloyal, she turned again to the mirror and carefully adjusted her hat.

"What's the matter with my looks?" she asked, pretending to be offended. And then to divert his attention. "I'm a good business woman," she said, "even if I don't rate as a glamor girl I sold those brown orchids."

"Did you?" he asked, surprised and pleased. "That was smart, Kathleen. That will save us trouble, maybe."

If he knew the circumstances, he wouldn't be pleased. Kathleen slipped into her last year's plaid coat with the beaverette collar. He would be angry if he knew she had made even an indefinite date with one of the college boys. With Don Alexander, especially, the disturbing thought continued. Dad was suspicious of people who lived easily, drove long rakish cars, and had charming manners. He was suspicious of education and leisure

and wealth and what he called "carriage trade ideas." He was contented with the way they lived. He seldom criticized Mother's management of the house. Her untidiness did not seem to annoy him. He loved her devotedly and made no effort to curb either her lively spirits or her bad taste.

That was strange, too, she reflected, for Dad spent his life creating beauty. He was devoted to his work. It was not only a business but an expression of artistic instincts more than ordinarily acute. He knew at a glance whether flowers were well or badly arranged.

He loved music, too. Her earliest and most delightful memories of her childhood centered around Dad's violin. He used to play for her and for Hilda after they were tucked into bed at night, German lullabies and the Irish folk songs Mother sang, not to show any partiality, and she had known the words and the melodies of the Christmas carols almost before she could talk. Dad didn't play often, now. He said his fingers were stiff. She'd asked him once if he didn't regret not having more training. His answer was typical of his attitude toward everything. "Making good music is for people who can afford it, Kathie. I had work to do."

Funny, when Grandfather and Grandmother Miller had come to America so that their children might have greater opportunities than in the old country. Difficult to understand Dad's attitude even if he was born in the gardener's cottage on an estate near Philadelphia and had grown up there and married Mother who was the housekeeper's niece. You'd have thought he would have wanted his children to have advantages he had missed.

He considered that they had advantages, though; graduation from high school, a comfortable home. He had enlarged the business to give Matt a start when he married, had sent Hilda to business school, took care of Rose and the kids when Cliff was out of a job. She'd had music

lessons with Miss Wilson, the organist at the Lutheran church, and Dad had wanted her to have the best of everything when she'd graduated from high school last spring. What she thought of as opportunities, he called "fancy notions," all well enough, perhaps, if you'd been born to them but not for him or his family. He wanted to keep them safe and secure in the way of life that satisfied him and became angry and stern if they had ideas of their own.

She had appreciated that security, last spring, after the accident. She had been thankful, so thankful, that Dad hadn't known. She had promised herself that she would be a good and dutiful daughter as long as she lived, not critical and rebellious, wanting things she couldn't have.

But now—

No use thinking of it. No use thinking at all. If you thought about miracles they were likely to seem less miraculous. She wanted to keep and to hold the miracle that had happened today.

"I'm going home, Dad," she said.

He roused from some thought, some anxiety.

"You needn't walk, Kathie," he said. "Joe will be along by and by in his car."

Joe! Always Joe! Joe was a part of Dad's safe plan for her whether he realized it or not. Joe was cut to Dad's pattern. No, not that exactly, she admitted. Joe was smart and ambitious and often surprised her with his ideas. Joe wasn't dull. He could dream, too, but the difference was that Joe knew when he was dreaming. That Irish head of his might be in the clouds but his feet were planted sturdily on the ground. It was fun being with him, most always. But she didn't want to ride home with Joe tonight.

"I don't mind walking," she said lightly. "After being in here all day I can stand some fresh air." She moved toward the swinging door into the shop. "'By, Dad. I'll

tell Mother you're coming soon."

"Forgetting something, aren't you?" he asked.

"Am I?"

"Saturday used to be payday." Dad smiled and his eyes twinkled in sunbursts of wrinkles. "Maybe times have changed. Maybe girls don't care about pretty things."

"I *did* forget."

She laughed and turned back from the door. Dad liked having his jokes appreciated. She wished he wouldn't carry his money in that canvas bag from the bank with the string wound round and round and tied in a double knot. It seemed penny-pinching and cautious. Don had taken a knot of bills from his pocket and hadn't bothered to count the change. Dad counted carefully, smoothing bills between his fingers, taking a very long time. She wished he wouldn't wear a sweater under his coat. He wasn't obliged to dress like a day laborer. That blue shirt was becoming, though. It had been through the washer so often that it was exactly the color of his eyes.

"There," he said, placing the bills one by one into her hand. "That should take care of a pretty or two, unless it's a diamond necklace you want."

She glanced up from the bills in her hand.

"But you've overpaid me," she said.

"That's a bonus for selling the orchids." Dad smiled with pleasure at her surprise. "We're willing to pay for smartness around here."

She was ashamed of her critical thoughts, ashamed of being ashamed of him. Tenderness welled up in her heart, an odd mingling of emotions, guilt at being paid for selling the orchids to Don, affection for Dad, shame for her restlessness, her impatience to get away.

"So, so!" Dad said gently with a pleased, half-embarrassed note in his voice. "So that's the kind of a girl you are, Kathie. Money goes to your heart. I'll overpay you again."

But his arm tightening about her shattered her mood. Of the mingled emotions only impatience was left, a frantic urge to get away. Affection trapped you and bound you. She drew away quickly. She had no intention of being bound by Dad's ideas. She knew that no matter what happened, if *he* remembered, she was going to see Don again.

Chapter Three

NOT THEIR KIND

THERE WEREN'T MANY PEOPLE on the streets. The cars which had brought crowds to the game were nearly all gone. The visitors who were remaining for the dance and the week-end were at dinner, now, or dressing for dinner at the hotel and the Inn, at the fraternity houses and in the rooms which town people rented to guests of the college.

The night was clear and cold, unusually cold for the middle of November, and the sky was crowded with stars. Kathleen glanced up as she walked down the steps of the town library with a book under her arm. So many stars and so far away. What could they know of the little people on the earth? And yet it had happened. She wondered, not *quite* believing but keeping her fingers crossed, in which particular group of stars her destiny was written. Her life and Don Alexander's, the way they had met and met again. No, you couldn't quite laugh it off.

Funny, how you felt the excitement of a party week-end even though downtown was comparatively quiet and only an occasional car sped past with honking horn and laughing voices, loud at first, then thinning into silence. Kathleen walked past the downtown shops, the drugstore, and Shultz's market. Her heels clicked briskly against the pavement as, moving in rhythm with the excitement she felt but could not see, she continued her progress toward home.

Funny how you knew what was going on, though the only visible signs of unusual festivity were banners in the shop windows, the college colors in festoons of bunting

or crepe-paper streamers, yellow and white chrysanthemums and, at the news shop, group photographs of the rival teams. You knew it by the restlessness you, yourself, felt, by the way your nerves tingled and your feet kept wanting to dance. You knew that girls were getting into evening dresses all over town, laughing and exchanging compliments, pinning on the corsages she had made. You knew that the fun would continue after the dance was over, that the dog-wagon would be crowded and that the Chocolate Shop would stay open most of the night. Tomorrow there would be late breakfasts, walks, special exercises in the chapel, suppers in the houses along Fraternity Row.

But tonight was most important, the football dance in the gym. She tried to imagine how Dad and the boys had arranged the decorations, wished she had made an excuse to stop in this afternoon. It wouldn't have looked like much by daylight, though. It was the lights that made it lovely, the lights and the girls' dresses and the music. There was to be a famous radio band—

She should have turned at the corner by the Baptist church. Home was out at the end of Locust Street, a block south of the college. She walked on along the avenue, instead, past the white house with the pillars where the president lived and on toward the campus. Mother was expecting her. She didn't care. She couldn't endure the idea of returning to pot roast and dumplings and the cheerful confusion of home. Not yet, at least. Not for a little longer. She wanted to prolong this feeling she had of sharing the excitement. She wanted so terribly to belong.

She hadn't minded being a town girl, especially, until last spring. Before then she'd been happy enough, interested in her schoolwork, linking the extra activities, dramatics and glee club and sports, going to the school dances, to the movies with Joe or Emil Hartman or one

of the younger crowd, having fun with the girls. She hadn't felt one of them entirely. She had fastidious ways which made her seem different as, in her heart, she knew she was. They recognized that difference. They called her "Princess," sometimes, and, though she pretended not to know what they meant, she was secretly pleased. And then Joe Regan was attentive to her. That, with the high school crowd, was a claim to distinction.

But last spring had brought a change. She hadn't been fit to live with, either in high spirits, for no reason at all, or wanting to cry. She'd lost interest in school, in the crowd, in everything that was familiar and accustomed. As the evenings grew longer and the lilacs budded and bloomed and the air became sweet and chill and heady like wine, she'd longed for something to happen with a desire that ached like a physical pain. It was then that her intimacy with Evvie Leonard had begun.

She didn't remember just how it started. She thought it must have been the afternoon that she'd met Evvie in the drugstore and those boys from the college Evvie was kidding with had asked them both to have a soda. "Bill Bailey is crazy about your looks, kid," Evvie had told her at school the next day. "Want a date? Us and the two of them. We're to meet them out by the athletic field. Are you game?"

Evvie hadn't paid much attention to her before. Evvie wasn't one of the gang. There was a good deal of gossip about her and her mother, too, and the girls weren't allowed to invite her to parties. Evvie didn't seem to mind. Or, thinking of it now, maybe she did. Maybe that was why she'd been reckless and wild. But no, Evvie was really wild, spoiled, somehow, and twisted inside. Evvie had formed an attachment for Kathleen, because the college boys were attracted to her and not from any personal feeling or regard. "We make a good team," she'd said once. "You're fair and I'm dark. You look like

an angel and I look like sin. Profane and sacred love."

Evvie wasn't trying to be smart when she said things like that. She knew what she was and made no apologies. Her appearance was a reflection of her behavior and thoughts. At a first glance you thought she was lovely looking with her white skin and cloudy dark hair, her enormous dark eyes, and full soft red lips. It was only when you knew her that you noticed the tired way her eyelids drooped, the slack curve of her lips. She thought of Evvie, sometimes, when she threw into the rubbish can a gardenia or a white rose which had seemed perfect but, when she looked at it carefully, she saw was beginning to curl and turn faintly brown.

But that hadn't been what she wanted. She'd known even while she was fascinated with Evvie that she had no desire to be like her. Oh, it had been exciting to sneak off with Evvie and meet boys. For a time going with Evvie secretly had seemed to satisfy the restless urge that possessed her. She hadn't liked the boys they met very well but there'd been nothing she need regret, just going out to the lake in the afternoon and breaking into the boathouse that, in the summer, rented canoes. Bill Bailey was usually her date and the car was his so he'd take her back to town when she insisted. They often left Evvie and her date there, and Evvie, the next day at school, would tell her a wonderful story of how they'd hitchhiked a ride on to Mike's and met some people there and hadn't got home until nearly dawn.

No, companionship with Evvie hadn't solved anything or brought her nearer her heart's desire. She'd known that before, yielding to coaxing, she'd gone with Evvie and the boys to Mike's that night. What she wanted was fine and beautiful—

She was passing the campus, now. The dormitories were brightly lighted. The foliage was gone from the trees so that shapes of buildings were clearly defined.

She knew them all, West College and East, the library, the science building, the round dome of the observatory. The spire of the chapel, thin and dark against the clear night sky, reached up through bare branches toward the stars. The chapel was beautiful, designed by a famous architect who was an alumnus of the college. She'd sensed its appeal before Joe told her that the chapel was as famous as its designer. People came from all over to see it. She, herself, seldom passed it without a consciousness of its dignity and beauty.

It was beauty she wanted, she supposed, though that was a high-sounding word. A queer mixture of things, space and privacy, candlelight, thin china and fine linen, the feeling of breathless delight she had when she watched the moonflowers open or looked at the college chapel or saw waves breaking in lace-edged scallops against a beach. Beauty. But, how did you get it when you didn't belong? When you'd been born into the wrong family—what did you do?

She should turn over to Locust Street, now. But she didn't. Walking more slowly, she went on along College Avenue. In these blocks the houses were the nicest in town, many of them dating from colonial times and kept in fine condition. The girls who lived in them were town girls, too, but with a difference. She'd gone to primary school with some of them but that didn't mean anything. They went away to school instead of to high and their fathers were college alumni. They'd be going to the dance tonight, those who were at home or who had come home for the occasion, Marjory Holden, Connie Aldrich, Mimi Nash, the Kenworthy girls. There were no social distinctions made between the college and the town girls who lived here.

And here, at last, was the Inn at the entrance to the golf course. She had meant to come here, of course. That was the reason she hadn't turned toward home where

she should have turned. It must be crowded tonight. Every window in the low rambling building was lighted and cars were packed into the parking areas on either side of the drive. As she watched, walking slowly, the door opened to admit new arrivals. She caught a glimpse of the interior, a log fire in a huge fireplace, bright colored chintz, girls in evening dresses and men in evening black and white. For an instant, she was part of the warmth, the light, the gay confusion. Then the door closed again.

She didn't expect to see him. She'd be embarrassed if he found her here at the gate, looking wistful, probably, like a kid with her nose pressed flat against a toyshop window. She'd feel pretty foolish if he came out, now, with his mother or that girl with the red-brown hair and saw her hanging around.

Why, then, had she come? She supposed the reason must be because she wanted to be near him. Crazy! No, not crazy, really, in the light of what had happened. It wasn't that she was in love with him, though she was, perhaps, in a way. But the way she felt was different from just a "crush," more than a desire to be with him and see him and hear him talk. He'd been born knowing the things she wanted to know. He represented—

A car came out of the drive. The headlights shone full upon her. She stepped back into shadows. But the car didn't swish by her into the street. It stopped with a sound of jammed-on brakes and somebody called her name.

She didn't recognize the voice just at first. Then her ears stopped buzzing.

"Oh, Joel Hello!" she called back.

Joe opened the door of the small coupé.

"For Pete's sake, Kathie," he asked, "what are you doing out here?"

"Taking a walk."

"Yeah?" Joe's voice told her that her explanation was not convincing. "I should think you'd need exercise after working all day. Get in."

She stepped into the car and closed the door. Joe released the brakes.

"I came to meet you," she said coolly, "and let you boss me around."

"Meaning it's none of my business?"

"Perhaps—" she agreed.

Joe laughed, not at all offended.

"Okay," he said. "I guess you're right. Going home? Or isn't that my business, either? A fellow can't be too careful what kind of questions he asks."

"Please bear that in mind," she said, but she laughed. Joe's good-natured kidding amused her. It was pleasant to ride. She hadn't realized how tired she was until now. "Did you deliver those last orders?" she asked.

"Bud hadn't got back when I stopped in at the shop. Your dad thought I'd better. Some party girl might be throwing a fit because her corsage hadn't arrived."

So the flowers had been delivered. Perhaps the girl with the red-brown hair was pinning brown orchids against her shoulder, now, or at the deep V of a low-cut gown, calling Don to help her, maybe, or at least to admire the effect. She wouldn't be wearing pink tulle sprinkled with stars. Nothing so simple and girlish. Satin, perhaps, or metal cloth which glittered like a snake's skin and fitted just as snugly. She sighed.

Joe's big shoulders moved toward her against the back of the seat.

"Tired?" he asked.

"Dead. It's been quite a day. Does the gym look nice?"

"Pretty good. Barn of a place to decorate. We could have used another truckload of stuff."

"The harvest moon effect— Did you see it?"

"Couldn't miss it. They spent most of the afternoon

trying to make it work. If it looks like a moon, I'm crazy. The cash customers won't know the difference, though. There's a good deal of celebrating going on over that measly three-to-nothing score. Did you hear the game?"

"Part of it. Did you?"

"Snatches. We should have won by two touchdowns easily. If Carver hadn't kept trying those trick plays, we'd have licked State hands down. What he should have done—"

Funny that Joe used the pronoun "we" in speaking of the college, she thought, as, driving slowly back along the avenue Joe went on to tell her what the coach should and should not have done. Joe's only connection with the college was that his father was head janitor and caretaker of the campus. Joe might have used the pronoun with every right in the world. He might have played with the team this afternoon. Joe had been captain of the high school team and had gone to prep school for a year on an athletic scholarship. He'd been considered one of the best school players in the country and might have written his own ticket for half a dozen colleges after he finished at prep.

He could have had it all for the taking, an education, glory and fame, important connections. But he'd turned down the offers and taken a job with Dad right here in his home town. She didn't understand. She never had. It seemed terribly stupid of Joe.

And yet he wasn't stupid. He was ambitious and smart and Dad thought the world of him. She liked him, too. She remembered how thrilled she'd been when Joe started taking her places. That was the year he began to work for Dad, her second year in high. She'd been sixteen, then, and how the older girls had envied her. Joe was a hero then, all right, with his football record at high and at prep, the home-town boy who made good. He was good-looking, too, and fun to be with and he

had unusually nice manners. People liked him. He had more friends than anyone she knew, even now when sports writers seldom mentioned him as a model for later school players and the red sweater with the big white M, which he wore turned inside, was getting pretty shabby.

She knew that he had a future in Dad's business, if you called it a future, just grubbing along with the flowers and bulbs. He'd make a living, certainly, maybe go in with Matt when Dad was through, since Bud was dead set, already, on working into a garage job as soon as he finished high school. But the chances he'd had and passed up. No, she couldn't understand it.

"In other words," Joe was saying, when she gave him her attention again, "if I'd been coaching, we'd have run them ragged." He was laughing at himself and being good-natured about it. "You've heard of back seat drivers. Well, I'm one."

"Joe," she asked, "don't you miss it?"

"Football? Sure." His big hands turned the wheel and the car leisurely rounded a corner. "It's fun if you remember it's just a game and don't get serious about it."

"On game days like this," she went on, "don't you wish you were playing?"

"Sure," he said cheerfully, "until I think of how winded I'd be after a couple of plays. Then I'm glad I'm on the sidelines or tuning in on a radio. I wouldn't last long enough to hear signals called twice."

"But if you'd kept in training— If you'd gone to college here," she persisted, "you'd be a senior now, and probably captain of the team. You'd be going to the dance tonight and everybody would make a fuss over you like they're fussing over Tom Burke."

"I think of it sometimes." Joe sounded more serious, now. "That would be fine, all right. But what about next year and all the years after that?"

She hadn't a pat answer ready, so she asked, instead, "Aren't you ever sorry you didn't go to college?"

"Nope," he said firmly. "Why? Do you think I should be?"

She was irritated by his attitude. It seemed to her as narrow and as exasperating as Dad's.

"I *do* think so," she said warmly. "I think you were a fool to pass up the chances you had."

He slowed down the already slow progress of the coupé.

"Listen, Kathie," he said, "I'd have had to go to college on an athletic scholarship and when you do that you sell yourself down the river. Don't make any mistake about that."

"But you get an education. You're prepared for something. You have a profession."

"Some fellows have," he said. "I couldn't and play football, too. I'm not quick enough at books. I found that out at prep school. You're too dog-tired after practice to concentrate and the teachers are likely to let your work slide during the season so that you're miles behind the rest of the class. Then just as you're beginning to catch up, if you've worked like the devil all winter, spring training starts and you're behind again. I'd have gotten through, maybe, but I wouldn't have known anything except football signals and how to bluff a prof. College is fine if your family can afford to send you, but not the way I'd have gone. See?"

"No, I don't see," she said crossly, though, in a way, she did. "You'd have made friends. You'd have known the kind of people who could have got you a job."

"Maybe," he agreed. "I made friends at prep school. Sure. I spent a couple of vacations in some pretty swell homes. But what did it get me? I'm not their kind and, sooner or later, either they or I would find it out. Listen, Kathie, facts are facts. Nearly everybody has a better life

with their own kind. I decided that when I went away to a fancy school. I like working for your Dad. I like watching things grow. I've got no kick."

She gave a little cry. "Don't talk like that!" she said. "Like what?"

"Oh, as though you can't be different from your parents, as though because you were born to a certain way of life you can't escape it."

Joe was silent for a moment. She glanced up at him sidewise and, in the light from the dashboard, saw that his face was unusually serious. When he turned to look at her, she glanced straight ahead.

"Maybe you're different, Kathie," he said slowly, after a while. "Maybe you could. That's what worries me."

"Worries you, Joe?"

"You see I've been waiting for you to grow up."

"I have," she said with dignity.

"Oh, have you?" This time when she glanced at him she saw his familiar grin. "There might be a difference of opinion about that," he said, "but we won't go into it now. You're tired and hungry and so am I. We'd start fighting, likely, and not do a good job. I don't like second-rate fights. Well, my last delivery for the day. Here we are."

They were at home. No doubt about that. The porch lights were on and light streamed from windows at the front of the house and from the sun porch at the side. Mother felt as though the family was groping in utter darkness unless every bulb in the house was turned on. The last town light, located almost directly before the house, further illuminated the scene. Kathleen glanced across the double lot where Dad grew flowers in summer toward Matt's bungalow beyond. One small light shone thriftily there. Anna May was saving.

Joe got out of the car and walked around to open the door for her.

"Movies?" he asked.

"Oh, not tonight, Joe." He was good-looking, big and well-proportioned, and strong as an ox. He took off his hat as he always did when he left her and the street light shone down on his curly brown hair. His eyes were sometimes blue and sometimes gray, with thick black lashes. He took her hand to help her out of the car.

"It's Saturday night," he said, "and me with a week's wages burning a hole in me pocket."

"You needn't go Irish on me. I'm sorry, I can't, Joe. I'm tired."

"So you walk up past the Inn. I make no sense of it."

"Don't try. You said yourself—"

"What did I say, Kathleen?"

"Oh, you and your blarney!"

An object dropped to the street as she stepped from the car.

Joe stooped, stood erect, held the book she had dropped toward the light. "Fairy tales," he said, with some surprise. "Hans Christian Andersen. What's the idea?"

"Bedtime stories for Dotty and Junior."

Joe laughed. "You don't need to read fairy tales to them. They can listen to Cliff."

"I thought they might like a change."

Joe's grin faded. He gave her the book. "Remember when you read them that they're fairy tales. Good night, Kathie." The grin broke through again. "I'll wait a while longer, maybe," he said. "I thought you told me you were grown up."

Chapter Four

ASKING TOO MUCH OF THE STARS

THE FAMILY WAS AT SUPPER. Kathleen heard voices in the dining-room when she stepped into the tropical warmth of the hall. Odors of good rich food rushed at her, making her feel a little faint. She wished she might go on up to her room. She wished she might do as she pleased, for once, without questions and explanations. She didn't want to hear Cliff Weaver bragging tonight or Rose nag at the kids or be obliged to pretend an interest in Mother's recital of the happenings of the day. She wanted to be quiet and undisturbed. She wanted to be alone.

Not a chance of that. Mother would think she was "coming down with something" and make a fuss and send for Doctor Peck. Mother couldn't understand why anyone should want to be alone. Better get supper over. They'd be going to the movies later on. This was Saturday night.

She placed the library book on the newel post of the stairway. What was it Joe had said about fairy tales? She couldn't remember. Already she had nearly forgotten riding home with him. The earlier events of the day filled her mind completely. She hung her coat on a branched stag-antler and removed her hat.

No one, apparently, had heard her come in. The clatter in the dining-room, Mother's laugh, Cliff's voice going on and on, Dotty's rising wail, covered her light movements in the hall. She lingered there, reluctant to join the others, wanting to hold fast to the miracle, to anticipations so slight, so dreamlike, that, at a touch of reality, they might vanish. She would be sensible to-

tomorrow. Tomorrow she would face facts. But just for tonight she might dream. It *had* happened. The sense of wonder, the happy excitement remained. She felt it tingling in her finger tips, doing queer things to her heart. Did she look as different as she felt? Would the others notice? Did it show in her face?

The hatrack mirror was illuminated by an *objet d'art* which hung by chains from the ceiling. In a cage made of glass beads strung on wires a glass parrot, life-sized and gaudily colored, perched on a gilded bar. The parrot concealed a bulb somewhere inside and the light coming through its feathers made strange streaks and shadows across the glass. Mother was proud of the horror. Cliff and Rose had given it to her the first Christmas after they were married when Cliff worked at the electric shop here in town. It was exactly the sort of thing Cliff Weaver *would* buy, she thought scornfully, and that Mother would love. Cliff was decidedly on the gaudy side which was probably why he couldn't bring himself to plug away at installing radios and demonstrating washing machines.

The glass parrot was a fact that must be faced. Not tonight, though. Her mind slid away from depressing thoughts as her glance left the mirror. The shadows and streaks were not flattering and dangling garments and miscellaneous hats made a scarecrow frame. Only one coat was hung neatly on a hanger. It was a dark wool coat with a collar so small that the fur was probably genuine. The coat must belong to Hilda. She glanced quickly along the hall. Yes, there on a chair was an overnight bag with the initials *H. M.* Hilda was here. That was the surprise at which Mother had hinted. Kathleen went on to the dining-room door.

Supper was at the dessert stage. As Kathleen watched, unobserved, Hilda rose and pushed back her chair. Hilda looked thin, Kathleen thought, and she was wearing

glasses. On another girl that dark wool dress, plain except for a clip at the neck, would be smart. It looked merely prim on Hilda. The glasses added to the effect and she wore her hair as she always had, neatly waved and rolled at the nape of her neck. Hilda lifted her plate from the table.

"Don't you bother with clearing," Mother said. She sat at the head of the table, rosy and beaming in a fresh print dress, her hair curling moistly around her face. "It's only hot apple pie with whipped cream. If I'd known you were coming I'd have made something special."

"I'd rather clear." Hilda pressed her lips together after she had spoken, in a tight line of disapproval. Small wonder, Kathleen thought. The table, in the blaze of light from the ceiling dome, looked as though an army on the march had been hastily fed. With Mother abundance was the keynote. She had outdone herself in honor of Hilda's unexpected visit. A flock of side dishes, jellies, pickles, jam, surrounded the bowl of wax fruit in the center. More substantial dishes crowded each other for space. She must have used every piece in the rose-patterned dinner set. Scarcely an inch of the cloth showed except where things had been pushed aside when Dotty spilled her glass of milk.

"You do it, Rose." Mother settled back comfortably in her chair. "Hilda's company. Besides, she'll get that nice dress spotted."

Rose was feeding Junior who sat in the high chair beside her. It must be the contrast with Hilda, Kathleen thought, which made Rose look especially blowsy. She'd certainly put on weight since she and Cliff and the kids had come home for a prolonged "visit" between jobs. She was still handsome with her high coloring, dark blue eyes, and curly brown hair. But she let herself go, seldom bothering to dress neatly. She probably had on

bedroom slippers, now, and that print dress was gone at the armholes. Rose had enough to worry her, heaven knew, with Cliff always out of a job. Not that she seemed to worry. She acted as though she thought Cliff was wonderful and told him he was right to walk out when he was imposed upon and spoke with confidence of "openings" which didn't materialize. Easygoing, that was Rose, though she sometimes nagged at the kids.

"Oh, why bother," Rose said, now. "Junior hasn't finished his cereal. He won't eat unless I feed him."

"That child should have been in bed an hour ago," Hilda spoke sharply and Kathleen saw a faint flush come into her cheeks. "If you had any idea of system, Rose—"

"Well, well!" Cliff Weaver spoke up jauntily. He sat in Dad's chair at the foot of the table. Kathleen saw only the back of his head, the thinning light brown hair sleekly brushed and shining with brilliantine. Cliff was a snappy dresser and spent hours at the barber shop. The coat of his chalk-striped dark gray suit was padded at the shoulders, making his neck look oddly thin. "Listen to who's talking!" he continued. "It's lucky you have Hilda to tell you how to raise your kids, Rose. Old maids' children are always perfect, or so I've heard. Correct me if I'm wrong."

The flush in Hilda's cheeks deepened. She was hurt, Kathleen thought. That was silly. Cliff didn't mean anything. He was teasing Hilda.

"I wouldn't have a baby cat at the table with adults," Hilda snapped back, "or allow a seven-year-old child to go to the movies at night."

That brought a wail from Dotty. "But you said I could go," she cried shrilly. "Gramma said I could go. And Mummy lets me. Can't I go to the movies, Gramma?"

"Yes, sweetheart. There, there," Mother soothed. "You can go with Gramma, darling." She glanced reproachfully at Hilda. "You oughtn't to get her upset," she said.

"You know how high-strung she is."

"She's spoiled," Hilda said. "That's all in the world that is the matter with her. A hairbrush would work wonders."

Dotty wailed, Cliff talked, Mother soothed, Rose raised her voice. Hilda brought a tray from the sideboard and started to clear the table. She was right, Kathleen thought, Dotty was dreadfully spoiled. It was hard to be really fond of her. She was a thin little girl with sharp features, a colorless skin, lanky light brown hair, the image of Cliff. She was smart enough, in a show-off way, and as curious as a monkey. Junior was different. She loved the two-and-a-half-year-old baby sitting placidly in his high chair beside Rose. Junior was sturdy and beautiful with Rose's dark blue eyes and curly hair and amiable disposition. Her own fingers itched, at times, to use a hairbrush on Dotty. She sympathized with Hilda. For an instant all her former admiration for her sister was revived.

"Hello!" she called through the confusion of voices. "Hello, Hilda! I wasn't expecting you."

Hilda set the tray on the table, her face brightening with pleasure.

"Hello, Kathie!" she replied. "You've been long enough getting here."

They met and embraced. Hilda's cheek, when she kissed it, smelled faintly of the toilet water she used. Kathleen kept her arm around her sister's waist, wanting to make amends for critical thoughts of Hilda.

"Mother, why didn't you tell me?" she asked. "I didn't know Hilda was here."

"She wanted to surprise you," Rose said, looking up with a wide, cheerful smile.

"She's a great one for surprises," Cliff said agreeably. He settled his necktie. "Hello, Kath."

"Aunt Hilda says I can't go to the movies," Dotty put

plaintively. "You tell her I can, too, Kathie. You tell her Gramma says yes."

"Aunt Kathie to you, my little chickadee," Cliff said and lit a cigarette. "Did I hear anyone around here say something about pie?"

"You hush up, Dotty. Kathie's tired." Mother pushed back her chair and rose briskly. "What's keeping Dad and Bud? Sit down, Kathleen. There's hot supper in the oven. You must be starved."

"Wait until I clear." Hilda moved about quickly, piling dishes and silverware on the tray. "This table looks like a bargain basement counter. Why were you so late, Kathie?"

"You girls wait to talk until Kathie's had something to eat." Mother bustled through the swinging door into the kitchen, moving lightly in spite of her weight.

Hilda followed with the tray. Kathleen slipped into a chair beside Junior's high chair.

"Hi there, fellow," she said and kissed his soft cheek. "He's darling, Rose."

"He's a nuisance," Rose said affectionately. "What's gotten into Hilda?" she asked a moment later. "The way she acts you'd think nobody else had any sense."

She knew that Rose didn't expect a reply. Rose was merely letting off steam. Cliff started in to talk about the orchestra which was playing for the college dance. He knew the fellow who played the piano, it seemed. He'd played traps with him once in a bush league band and thought he'd drop in at the gym and say hello for old-times' sake. Rose asked questions and Cliff's opening remarks lengthened into a narrative. Cliff explained that he, himself, would probably be with a big time band, now, if he hadn't broken two fingers in a minor league baseball game and lost his technique with the drumsticks. Rose listened, admiring and absorbed, neglecting Junior's cereal. Rose swallowed Cliff's bragging hook,

line, and sinker, it seemed. His tall tales had won her and held her and she thought he was as wonderful as when they had been married under an arch of roses and southern smilax on the sun porch eight years ago.

Kathleen paid little attention. The burst of half-forced animation with which she had greeted Hilda was gone. The happy excitement was ebbing into weariness. No use dreaming, not even tonight. When he knew how she lived, what sort of a family she had, he would lose his slight interest in her. She glanced around the room, seeing it clearly and without sentiment, through Don Alexander's eyes. The scenic paper was nearly as bad as the glass parrot, she thought despairingly. There was too much furniture crowded into the room. The cut-glass punch bowl on the sideboard was dusty and filled with accumulated odds and ends. The rayon silk draperies at the windows with net glass curtains inside added to the clutter. Dad owned a flower shop and yet they must have wax pears and bananas and oranges in the center of the table.

She might as well face facts now and get high-flown nonsense out of her head. What if you couldn't quite laugh off the way they had met? What if he had saved her from tragedy? It was asking too much of the stars to hurdle the obstacles involved. She tried to imagine Don Alexander here, sitting across the table, listening to Cliff brag, hearing Dotty sing "The Beer Barrel Polka" while she teetered to and fro on the back legs of her chair.

Her imagination was vivid. She saw him with painful clearness, his casual elegance emphasized by his surroundings, being polite but distant, or, worse still, looking sorry for her. The picture completed the wreck of her anticipations. Tears stung her eyes and her throat closed up tight. She pushed back her chair, bumping Mother who came in from the kitchen with a plate piled high with hot food.

"Matter, kid?" Cliff asked, breaking off his narrative abruptly.

"Kathie, dear—?" Rose's eyes were wide with surprise.

"Kathie's crying!" Dotty squeaked and thumped four legs of her chair on the floor.

Mother set the plate on the table.

"What is it, Kathie?" she asked and tried to take her daughter into her arms.

"Nothing—" Kathleen drew away, ashamed of being made to Mother but frantic to escape. "Nothing—I—"

"You're coming down with something." Mother's expression was concerned. "I thought when you came in you looked like you had fever. Here, let me feel your head."

She pushed Mother's hand away. "I haven't," she said crossly. "I—I'm tired, that's all."

"Of course you are," Mother soothed. "You've had a long hard day and nothing but drugstore stuff in your stomach. Eat your supper and you'll feel better."

Kathleen turned her glance from the piled up plate. "I couldn't—" she said. "Please, Mother—I couldn't swallow—"

"Does your throat hurt, Kathie?" Mother was working into a fine state of maternal anxiety. She applied the same enthusiasm to family ills that she did to pleasures, fairly killing you with kindness. She was concerned but she was excited, as well, and looking forward to an orgy of ice bags and hot-water bottles and custards and soups, cozy chats with Doctor Peck and telephone conversations with her friends. The others were stimulated by her excitement, as usual, and shared her concern.

"Do you suppose it's tonsillitis?" Cliff asked brightly.

"Can't be," Rose said practically. "She's had them before."

"I did, too. And my throat hurt," Dotty chirruped. "I went to a hospital and had ice cream."

"We'll not be talking of hospitals," Mother said with a dark look at Dotty. "She'll stay in her own home where I can take care of her myself. I don't think much of hospitals, all the rules and no taste to the food. She can have Bud's room to save steps. When did you first feel it, darling? Is it bad?"

"It's nothing— Really, Mother—" Silly to have caused such a scene. Kathleen was half-laughing but crying, too, feeling tears roll down her cheeks. She felt smothered with kindness, hedged in by affection and concern, one of the family, not herself, the Kathie whom Don Alexander had remembered, who had spent the afternoon and early evening in a dream. Last spring kindness had been a refuge. She'd felt sheltered and safe in the noisy, affectionate family group. She resented them, now, and was ashamed of the resentment. Still it was silly to have made such a scene—

They were talking in concert, sympathizing, suggesting. Dotty chirped like a cricket through the clatter. Junior, disturbed by adult behavior, cried lustily. Hilda came in from the kitchen.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

"Nothing—" Kathleen laughed shakily. "I— They—I'm just not hungry and—"

"Kathie's sick, Aunt Hilda," Dotty explained importantly. "Her throat hurts."

"Can't somebody keep that child quiet?" Hilda asked. "Don't you feel well, Kathie?"

"I'm all right," Kathleen protested. "I'm tired, that's all."

"I don't wonder." Hilda took matters in hand. "You go on up to bed. I'll bring you a tray."

"Hadn't I better call Doctor Peck—" Mother began but Kathleen did not wait to reply. She went half-running out of the dining-room and into the hall.

The glass parrot leered down at her through the

beaded wires of his cage. On the newel post lay the library book. Kathleen took it as she started upstairs. She remembered now what Joe had said. "Remember, when you read them, that they're fairy tales."

She knew what Joe meant. She had a strong impulse to hurl the book at the parrot. That was one way of facing facts. What a lovely crash he would make smashing down on the steps with beads rolling in all directions. But Mother would surely call Doctor Peck if she did. Mother would think she had lost her mind.

Besides—

"If you hadn't looked like the little mermaid."

With the book in her hand she went on up the stairs.

Chapter Five

HILDA'S SUGGESTION

THE ROOM ON THE THIRD FLOOR was a haven and a retreat. Kathleen felt better as soon as she had switched on the lights and closed the door. She had shared it with Hilda before Hilda left home. Hilda had painted the furniture, the two low beds, the two chests of drawers, and decorated them with stenciled bouquets of flowers. Hilda had selected the wallpaper which Mother thought was so dreadfully plain. Kathleen, herself, had added touches since Hilda went away, the thin curtains at the windows, the bookcase, the wicker chair, the hooked rugs on the dark painted floor.

She shared the room with Dotty, now. She'd hated giving up her privacy when Rose and Cliff and the kids came home, but it hadn't been so bad. Dotty liked to be in the middle of whatever was going on downstairs and seldom came to the room until she was led, by force, at bedtime. She left things around, though. Kathleen swept an assortment of objects off the bed Dotty occupied, a chewed-looking Teddy bear named Winnie-the-Pooh, the Charlie McCarthy doll Cliff had brought her from Atlantic City, a movie magazine, a litter of caramel papers and lollypop sticks. Evidently, at some time during the afternoon, Dotty had been sent up to take a nap.

Kathleen bundled the clutter into the closet and closed the door with a slam. It hadn't occurred to either Mother or Rose that Hilda must have Dotty's bed, tonight. She took fresh sheets from one of the chests of drawers and made up a bed for Hilda. The activity gave her spirits an additional lift. Now that she was here, alone in her room, her thoughts went back to the shop and Don.

Alexander. Unconsciously, while she smoothed sheets into place, she reassembled fragments of hope and anticipation, making the dream nearly perfect again. She'd been tired, that was all. She'd exaggerated the effect the household might have upon Don. Maybe the way your family lived wasn't as important as she thought—

She was settled in bed, the book from the library tucked out of sight under the covers, when Hilda came in with a tray.

"That looks nice," she said appreciatively.

Hilda set the tray on the table beside the bed.

"Mother wanted to send up pot roast and dumplings," she said. "I thought you'd rather have something not quite so heavy."

"I couldn't face a dumpling. This is fine." Kathleen applied herself with appetite to the contents of the tray. The poached eggs were beautifully done and the strips of bacon cooked just right. The toast was a golden-brown. The chocolate was frothy and piping hot. "It's swell!" she mumbled with her mouth full. "I didn't know I was starved."

Hilda looked pleased. She pulled the wicker chair forward.

"This is new," she said.

"Birthday present from Dad. I selected it, though."

"I thought so." Hilda seated herself and glanced around the room. "I get homesick for this room, sometimes. Do you remember how Mother fussed when I insisted on having it?"

"I remember. She meant it for the boys."

"I liked it up here away from everything."

"I like it, too."

"Even with Dotty under foot?"

"It's not so bad." Kathleen spread toast with jam. The food Hilda brought her was working wonders. She'd been hungry, that was all. It was pleasant to lie propped

up against pillows in her own comfortable bed.

"I think it's outrageous!" Hilda burst out. "The way Cliff and Rose sponge on the folks!"

"They like having them here. At least Mother does and anything Mother likes is all right with Dad."

"It isn't all right!" A flush came into Hilda's cheeks and her eyes snapped through the lenses of her glasses. "How long will they stay this time?"

She was offended because Cliff had called her an old maid. Hilda hadn't much humor beyond an acid sort of wit and her feelings were easily hurt. She shouldn't have paid any attention to Cliff. Cliff teased her because she fell for it. Hilda, in her efforts to improve herself, had developed a single track mind. She thought of herself constantly and had discovered the word "reaction." She was "reacting" to Cliff's intended humor with characteristic seriousness.

"I wouldn't know," Kathleen said. "Cliff says he's prospecting."

"I can well imagine," Hilda said grimly. She was silent for a moment. Then, "How do you *bear* it, Kathie?" she asked. "This house? The children? All the clutter and noise? I should think you would go mad!"

"I did want to smash that darned parrot tonight," Kathleen said.

She made the confession in an effort to lighten Hilda's mood. She'd thought Hilda might think it was funny. It seemed so to her, now, as revived by food and soothed by quiet, she lay propped against pillows in the soft glow of the bedside lamp. She'd tell Don, sometime—Now, why had that thought popped into her mind? A short time ago she had abandoned all hope of knowing him more intimately. Yet, here she was making plans, as confident and excited as though the scene downstairs hadn't occurred. Certainly she would tell him. Sometime when he came to the house and saw the lamp in the hall.

She would tell him how she nearly hurled Hans Christian Andersen at the parrot.

But Hilda was not amused.

"I don't wonder," she said, with no alteration of exasperated severity. "It's awful. It's all awful and you're wasting your life staying here. Why don't you go back with me tomorrow and start a business course? You had a little typing in high school."

"Yes, and it was the only course I ever came near flunking."

"Oh, nonsense!" Hilda swept that obstacle away with a flap of her hand. "You weren't properly instructed. You have a good head, Kathie, and with your looks—"

"I might get a job as a file clerk," Kathleen laughed, surprised that it came without effort and sounded gay. "Or why not the Five and Dime on Chestnut Street. I could model fish-net turbans and needn't waste money on taking a course."

Hilda frowned at her sister's levity.

"I'm serious," she said, though she needn't have. In her plain dark dress and glasses, every blond hair in place, an earnest expression sharpening her attractive features, she was the living image of ambitious young womanhood. Hilda might be pretty, Kathleen thought, regarding her sister appraisingly. If she wasn't so dead set on improving her mind, her natural assets might have a chance. She had a clear skin, nice eyes, a lovely figure, long graceful legs. Plenty of girls, less generously endowed, had men buzzing after them in swarms. It *was* Hilda's state of mind, she concluded. To Hilda, life was real and life was earnest and attracting men in swarms was not its goal—

"What sort of future will you have if you stay here?" Hilda went on. "You're wasting your youth and your talents. You can make anything of yourself you like if you have courage and ambition."

Hilda really believed that, Kathleen thought, though she was probably quoting from an "improving" book or repeating what she'd heard at a meeting of the business girls' club. Can I make myself into a smoothie like that girl with the red-brown hair? she wanted to ask. The girl who was dancing with Don tonight. The girl who was wearing brown orchids and dancing with Don. Will courage and ambition provide me with a background such as she probably has? How many generations does it take to produce a debutante?

She resisted the impulse. Hilda wouldn't know that she, too, was serious. Hilda would think she was making fun.

"Oh, I'm all right," she said lightly.

"Do you really like working at the shop?"

"It has its points. Yes, I like it."

"I don't believe you," Hilda said flatly. "I can see that you're miserable. The way you acted tonight—"

"Oh, that!" Kathleen interrupted. "I was tired. That was all. I'm fine, now. Don't worry."

"I do worry." Hilda's voice expressed both distress and exasperation. "We're not like the others, you and I. Don't you remember how we used to plan? I thought you'd come to me when you'd finished high school." She paused, then continued, "You'd get along fine, Kathie. You're smart and pretty and people like you. The things I have to work for come naturally to you. It's ridiculous for you to stay here and work for Dad."

It was ridiculous, maybe, but not for any reason that Hilda had presented. It was ridiculous, perhaps, to stay at home because Don Alexander had returned and had remembered her. That might come to nothing, of course. If she went with Hilda, she might possibly spare herself anxiety. She wouldn't spend her time wondering, waiting, starting up when the telephone rang, blissful one moment, depressed the next, as she had been tonight.

But she'd lose the happy excitement, too, the sense of expectancy, this feeling of wings in her heart—

"Dad needs me," she said finally. "I think I'll stay here."

"He doesn't need you," Hilda persisted. "You must think of yourself. He likes having you at the shop, of course. But anyone could do what you're doing there. Dad would raise objections. He did when I wouldn't take a job in town. He'd keep us all here at home until we're eighty if he could. But he isn't unreasonable. If you tell him what you want and stick by your guns, he'll see you through."

"But I don't want to leave here," Kathleen said, irritated by Hilda's persistence. "I like the shop and being at home. Really, Hilda, I do."

Hilda was silent for an interval. A frown printed lines between her brows as she looked at her sister. Then the frown disappeared and Hilda asked hesitantly, "Is it Joe Regan, Kathie?"

"Joe?" Kathleen asked, surprised. "Do you mean—"

"He's in love with you," Hilda said.

"Oh, is he?" Kathleen laughed. "Did he ask you to tell me?"

"Certainly not," Hilda said seriously. "But he is. Kathie, don't marry Joe."

"Good heavens! He hasn't asked me."

"He will if you stay here," Hilda predicted. "And you'll marry him to please Mother and Dad. They think the sun rises and sets on him. I know what will happen."

"You know more than I do, then. Anyway, why not? What's wrong with Joe?"

Hilda considered the question gravely. "Nothing *wrong*," she said after a moment. "He's attractive, really, good-looking and steady and pleasant. But what kind of life would you have? Dad would build you a bungalow on the lot beyond Matt's, and Joe would come home

with mud on his boots shouting for pot roast and dumplings."

"I don't object to pot roast," Kathleen said mischievously, "not usually, I mean."

"You'd know the same people and do the same things you've always done," Hilda continued. "You used to want something different. Do you remember the houses we planned? Yours was always more elegant than mine."

"With damask draperies. I remember. I've changed my mind."

"Kathie, do you like him?"

"Joe? Of course. Who doesn't?"

"But *especially*, I mean."

"Yes, especially. Joe is as fine as they come. Don't think I don't know that." It wasn't only an imp of perversity which led her on to tease Hilda. She was surprised to find herself resenting Hilda's criticism of Joe. She'd thought the same things herself but hearing them from Hilda aroused her indignation. She did not intend to marry Joe, even if he asked her. She couldn't imagine living in a bungalow next to Matt's and cooking pot roast for Joe's supper. But Hilda needn't make caustic remarks about him. He was an old and valued friend.

"Well, pardon me, I'm sure, if it's none of my business." Hilda rose from the new wicker chair. "I'll go down and see if Dad and Bud have come. Mother will expect me to go to the movies. Do you mind being left alone?"

"Not a bit," Kathleen said. Then, thinking her abrupt reply might hurt Hilda's feelings, she added, "It's nice having you here. I'll probably be asleep when you get back but we'll talk tomorrow."

Hilda took the tray from the table beside the bed. "I wish you would go with me, Kathie," she said, more wistfully than she knew, perhaps. "I like my work and everything but it's lonely sometimes."

"We'll talk about that tomorrow, too," Kathleen said. "Thank you for bringing my supper."

"I'm glad you liked it." Hilda went to the door. "And don't mind my speaking of Joe," she called back over her shoulder. "It's just that I couldn't bear you not to have what you want because—"

"Damask drapes?" Kathleen asked cheerfully. "What are they anyway? It's something I read in a book. Good night, Hilda dear. Have fun at the movies."

Hilda closed the door quietly. Her footsteps sounded on the stair treads and then were lost in silence. Kathleen took the book from under the covers. She consulted the contents and found the story. There was an illustration. The little mermaid had waist-long hair, as pale golden as her own. She wore a garland of shells and iridescent scales tapered into a fish tail. She sat on the bottom of the ocean with shells all around and fish swimming through ribbons of seaweed, painted an odd blue-green. Her eyes were blue, as blue as sapphires, as blue as her own, and she sat looking wistfully up toward the surface of the water, smiling a sad little smile.

So that was how she had looked to Don that night last spring. Kathleen wasn't sure she liked the idea. She'd certainly worn more clothes and her hair hadn't been floating down over her shoulders. She settled back against the pillows, pulled the lamp closer and read:

Far out at sea the water is as blue as the bluest cornflower, as clear as the clearest crystal; but it is very deep, so deep for any cable to fathom, and if many steeples were piled on top of one another they would not reach from the bed of the sea to the surface of the water. It is down there that the mermen live.

Steps sounded coming up the stairs and the door was opened, admitting Mother and a blast of music from a radio on the second floor.

"I couldn't rest easy about you, dear," Mother said.

"Hilda says you're fine but I couldn't enjoy the movies if I wasn't sure you haven't a fever. Open your mouth."

Kathleen hid the book under the covers again, keeping the place with a finger between the pages. She sighed as Mother bent over her with a thermometer. She envied the little mermaid. There was something to be said for living at the bottom of the sea. Fish didn't talk.

Chapter Six

SNEAKING SEEMS CHEAP

SHE HADN'T LONG TO WONDER and wait. Before she had really expected him, he came again to the shop. She'd devoted Sunday to Hilda in an effort to compensate for disappointing her sister. She and Joe had gone to the station with Hilda and put her on the train.

"What have I done to make Hilda sore?" Joe asked when the train had gone and they walked back to Joe's car. "She's hardly spoken to me all afternoon."

"I don't know," Kathleen said. But she did. Hilda had returned to the city believing that Joe was the reason Kathleen had remained at home. She'd watched Hilda snub Joe with frosty politeness when he'd dropped in as they were finishing dinner and through the afternoon. She'd been relieved that Hilda had found even so absurd an explanation for her own puzzling behavior. Hilda might have asked embarrassing questions. It had amused her to watch Hilda weighing Joe, to see her practical mind putting two and two together and arriving at false conclusions. But then, when Joe had spoken of it, she'd no longer been amused. Looking up at Joe's gloomy face, she'd felt guilty. "She wasn't cross at you," she'd said when Joe helped her into the car. "She's disappointed in me."

"Why?" Joe had asked. He was wearing his new Sunday overcoat, a thick gray coat with a Scotch plaid lining, and he wore it with quite an air. He'd been unusually well-groomed; "slicked up for courting," Mother had observed in her forthright way. And, of course, even in work clothes Joe was good-looking; in corduroys and a sheepskin coat, with mud on his boots. He had been

particularly attentive to her, without making a point of it or excluding the others. Joe had a way with him, no denying that. She didn't wonder that Hilda had jumped to conclusions.

"She wanted me to go back with her," Kathleen had said. "She thinks I should take a business course and get a job in the city when I've finished."

"And you have a different idea?"

She'd laughed, conscious of Joe's eyes watching her. They'd been as gray as smoke and oddly intent.

"I nearly flunked typing in high," she'd said. "As a secretary, I don't think I'd be a shining light."

"You'd shine anywhere, Kathie," Joe had said, his voice giving a meaning to the words which his laughing eyes denied. "But I'm glad you're not going away."

She'd felt guilty again, knowing how little Joe had to do with her staying at home. But the evening had been pleasant. They'd stopped in at Thelma's and some of the old crowd were there. They'd danced to the radio and Thelma had brought out food, and Joe, as he usually did, had turned an informal gathering into a party. She couldn't remember when she'd enjoyed her old friends more. Anticipations, like lighted tapers in her mind, gave a sparkle to unremarkable pleasantries. She was able to bear with Emil Hartman's clowning and Ruthie's flip flirting with Joe.

She'd joined in the fun, but with a feeling of detachment. These were her friends. She'd known them from kindergarten on up through grammar and high school. But she felt like a stranger visiting town, only temporarily one of the crowd. Being with them, dancing with Joe, helping Thelma make sandwiches, imposed no lasting obligations. Tomorrow, the day after, she'd thought, her real life would begin. She could laugh with the others and join in the fun. Familiar boundaries no longer hemmed her in. Doors were opening before her.

endless vistas. It had happened. Don had returned.

"Nice evening," Joe had said when he'd opened the front door for her at home.

"It's been fun," she'd agreed.

His hand had cupped her elbow, holding her there on the porch. "You seemed to enjoy it," he'd said. "You seemed—I don't know—the way you used to be."

"The way I used to be when?"

"Before last spring. Since then—it sounds crazy—but I've had the feeling—"

"What sort of feeling?" she'd asked, as he paused.

"That you were waiting for something." He laughed as though at himself. "I told you it sounded crazy."

"It certainly does." She'd laughed, too, but a little nervously. Joe had noticed more than she'd thought. "What would I be waiting for?" she'd asked.

"Lord only knows, a girl your age who reads fairy tales."

"So that's still bothering you, is it?"

"Not so that I can't sleep. But just the same—"

She hadn't given him time to complete the thought. "Good night," she'd said. "Thank you for everything. See you tomorrow."

He had released her elbow reluctantly. "You aren't interested in what I think?" he had asked.

She'd turned quickly, realizing that she had cut him off abruptly. But he wasn't offended. In the light from the hall she'd seen his half-smile widen into a grin. He treated her like a kid sister, she'd thought, surprised to feel a slight stir of resentment. His manner was protective and, though they quarreled, he was never really angry with her. It seemed to amuse him to "get her Irish up," as he expressed it, but he didn't hit back and the quarrel ended in laughter.

And yet Hilda's suspicions weren't entirely imaginary. She'd dismissed the subject lightly but she knew there

was some truth in what her sister had said. Joe was more than merely fond of her in a big brother way, as Matt was. She was aware of his interest. He watched her, when they were together, as though from her response to situations and surroundings, from her comments and gestures, he fitted pieces of her together like a jig-saw puzzle. His teasing, at times, had a purpose behind it. He did it deliberately, hoping to trick her into expressing what was in her mind. Very often he succeeded and she would be surprised and indignant, but since the revelations were seldom important, indignation would soften into humor and a reluctant but sincere admiration for Joe's quick wits.

Yes, there'd been some truth in Hilda's reasoning, as wide of the mark as it had hit. Joe was very fond of her. Sometimes, when they danced, she'd feel his arm tighten and hear his heart pound. Then, glancing up quickly, she would see tiny flickers, like flames, in his smoke gray eyes. When he was conscious of her glance the flickers were not there, only twinkles of good humor or the softened expression of pleasure and admiration which told her, as he often told her in words, that she was "growing up into quite a girl."

That expression had been in his eyes, then, when she'd turned to apologize with a glance for having been unthinkingly rude. She'd returned his smile.

"I'll be interested tomorrow," she'd said. "Right now I'm sleepy."

"You yawn like a kitten," he'd said. "But I believe you. Good night and happy dreams."

"I'm sure I'll have them," she'd said and closed the door and gone upstairs.

But she hadn't dreamed. She'd undressed quickly, with only the night light on so as not to rouse Dotty, and had fallen asleep almost as soon as her cheek had touched the pillow. And then the alarm clock had slashed

through slumber and she'd blinked herself awake in the gray light that filled the room and Doty had popped a fire-cracker string of questions at her and another day had begun.

She hadn't expected Don on Monday. Nothing pleasant happened on Monday, especially when rain fell in torrents and a cold wind threatened to turn umbrellas inside out and whipped the last leaves down from the shivering trees. Besides, he would be starting in with classes on Monday and probably be tired from the weekend. He'd have plenty to do, she told herself at intervals on Monday, getting settled back into college routine and seeing his friends. She wouldn't expect him on Tuesday. After all, and that thought was a cheerful note in the gloom of the day, he would be here in town indefinitely. She wouldn't ask too much of the stars. If he came by the end of the week—

But he came on Tuesday, late in the afternoon, when she'd about given up hope. She was pecking at the typewriter in the workroom, getting out bills for Dad, when the bell danced and jingled above her head. Her heart danced, too, as she pushed back her chair. It might not be Don, of course. But business was slow at the first of the week and the storm had continued. It wasn't likely that anyone would venture out to buy flowers in this drenching rain. The bell hadn't rung all day except when Dad had gone out a few minutes ago.

She couldn't afford to take a chance. She tore off the smock she wore and slipped into a fresh one, pink as the heart of a rose and rustling with starch. A hundred bells jingled inside her, making a lovely commotion. She washed her hands, remembering how grubby they'd been when he was here before, ran a comb through her hair, used a lipstick, powdered her nose. The bells inside her jingled like mad when she pushed through the swinging door.

It was Don. This time he was watching for her. He stood, shaking water from his hat, his glance directed at the door into the workroom.

"Hello!" she said and turned on the lights. The gloom disappeared in a flood of brilliance from the frosted globes in the ceiling.

"That's better," he said, smiling a warm quick smile. "Fine weather we're having. I thought I'd take a walk in the rain. I've heard it recommended."

"April rain, perhaps. Not a northeaster."

"Is this a northeaster?" He pretended a vast dismay. "They carry on for three days, don't they? I can't stand another day of this. I can't stand today."

"I don't know what we can do about it." Joe and Matt were out at the greenhouse. Bud wouldn't be in this afternoon. He was practising with the band at school. But Dad was downtown. Where had he said he was going when he went out? She couldn't remember—

"Don't you?" His voice was plaintive. "I hoped you would. I thought to myself, if I'm brave enough to swim these floods, Kathleen will know what to do. Do you mind my calling you Kathleen? I like it, you know. I can't think of a name I prefer for you though I've gone into the matter thoroughly."

"Have you?" She laughed. It was nonsense, but she liked it. Talking to him was like opening surprises at Christmas. You didn't know what was coming next.

"There's 'Kathie,' of course," he continued. "I'm saving that—"

"—for a rainy day?" she asked, returning nonsense for nonsense.

"All right, then, 'Kathie,'" he agreed. "That saves time, doesn't it? And, since we're saving time, will you have dinner with me tonight?"

That was a surprise.

"Tonight—?" she repeated, her heart beating lightly

and quickly. But how could she arrange it? What excuses would sound plausible at home? They'd think she was crazy if she said she wanted to stay downtown for the movies. It was raining cats and dogs and kangaroos. If she'd known in advance— If she'd been prepared—

He misunderstood the reasons for her hesitancy. "As a favor to me," he said and his smile was very persuasive. He sat on the edge of the table where, at holiday seasons, flower arrangements were displayed. "I'm on the verge of despondency and only you can save me."

His appearance did not suggest a gloomy state of mind. He looked well-groomed, even in a dripping wet raincoat, and as though he hadn't a care in the world.

"I wouldn't have guessed it," she said, postponing a reply to his invitation. She couldn't have dinner with him in the clothes she'd worn to the shop, a jacket suit with a sweater, her raincoat, and beret. She couldn't go home and dress and have him call for her there. What excuse could she possibly make? And she hadn't kept her appointment at the beauty shop. It had seemed foolish in the rain—

His voice checked her racing thoughts.

"You disappoint me, Kathie—Kathleen," he said in mock reproach. "I hoped you wouldn't be deceived. I'd hoped you'd say, 'Come now, Don, my lad, you aren't obliged to be quite so brave. Let's go somewhere for dinner and throw dull care to the winds.' Not to have known at once that my state of mind is one of black despair— That really wounds me."

She laughed. "What is all this about being brave? You want me to ask, I suppose?"

"I hoped you would, though I'd have told you, anyway. Yes, black despair," he repeated with an exaggerated groan. "I've spent nearly two days with learned advisers. The work they've mapped out for me doesn't bear thinking of at the moment. It will keep my nose to

the grindstone for the rest of the year."

Such a handsome nose, she thought, and wished she'd made the comment aloud. His nonsense gave her confidence. She felt nearly as much at ease with him as she did with Joe or the other town boys she knew. Too late, now. She laughed again, instead, amused by his pretense of woe.

"You aren't taking me seriously." His voice was plaintive but his eyes, meeting her eyes, twinkled. "That spoils all my plans."

"What were your plans?"

"To make you feel sorry for me," he said blandly, "so you'd let me take you to dinner. When I saw you the other day, I thought you were kind as well as beautiful. Now I'm afraid you're only beautiful, though that's too stately a word to describe you. You look like a kid in that pinafore. I keep expecting your nurse to come in and tell you it's time for supper."

"This is a smock," she said with a laughing attempt at dignity.

"Whatever it is, it's becoming." His dark eyes, still twinkling, admired her. "You're the first cheerful sight I've seen today. I had the best of intentions. I sat down with a stack of books and I said to myself, 'Up and at 'em, Alexander. You'll never get your name in gold letters on an office door if you dillydally!' It didn't do any good. Even the gold letters didn't help. Will you have dinner with me?"

"I'd like to, but—" She broke off, her thoughts racing again.

"Break it," he suggested. "Dates have been broken before. It's done every day and the world jogs on. He'll forgive you."

"It isn't that," she said quickly, but she was gratified because he thought she had a date. She hadn't appeared too eager, then. That was all to the good.

"If it isn't a date, what is it?" he asked.

"I'd have to make excuses at home," she said. "And I can't think of any good ones."

"Well, two heads are better than one. I'm fine at inventing excuses. But why must you make them?"

She might as well tell him, she supposed. No use postponing the issue. But she didn't want to sound like a prig or to appear to attach too much importance to a casual invitation.

"My parents," she began, searching for tactful words, "have some very odd ideas."

"Most parents have." He dismissed the issue with a smile. "But leave them to me. I have a way with parents, with mothers, especially. They usually like me."

"Not mine," she said, then added quickly. "They'd like you personally, maybe. Yes, Mother would and Dad, too. But they, he at least, wouldn't approve of your taking me to dinner."

He seemed surprised but not offended. "Why not?" he asked.

She made an effort to answer lightly. "Oh, Dad keeps a shotgun handy in case a college student should come prowling around the front door."

"I'm not a student. Any one of my learned advisers will assure you of that."

"That doesn't help. I'm afraid. Dad thinks all college boys have—well, questionable intentions toward town girls."

His brows quirked up into peaks and his teasing smile slanted. "Do you think my intentions are—well, questionable, Kathleen?"

"I don't think you have intentions."

"But I have. At least I had until now. I intended to take you to dinner. I hadn't anticipated the shotgun, though. Your dad is probably right, at that. Theoretically, I agree with him. Well, this ends what might have

been a pleasant friendship. I suppose you *would* question my intentions if I should think of a good watertight excuse?"

"No, I wouldn't," she admitted. "I've been trying but I haven't made any headway."

"Good girl!" He stood erect. "Or maybe not," he added and again his eyebrows quirked into peaks. "I shouldn't urge you to disregard your parents' wishes. We'll make it right, though. I'll pay a formal call if you'll unload the shotgun. After all—" he took her hands and drew her from the edge of the table where she had sat—"haven't I some claim on your time and attention?"

"Have you?" She stood beside him and he released her hands. He was nearly as tall as Joe. She had to tilt her head back to meet his glance directly.

His expression was half-serious, half-amused, as though he ridiculed himself for some passing thought which even ridicule could not dismiss entirely.

"You, yourself, told me that I saved your life," he said easily.

"Oh that— You did and I'm grateful."

"Don't be grateful," he said gently. "I won't press the claim unless you give me some encouragement. This isn't a holdup. I just won't speak of it again if it troubles you, Kathleen."

"It doesn't trouble me now."

"What does, then? Your conscience?"

"Not as much as it should."

"You've something on your mind." He touched her forehead with his finger tips. "You have a wrinkle. Right here. Between your brows."

She couldn't explain the wrinkle, nor tell him why she was troubled. She didn't want him to think she attached any undue importance to his invitation. His thoughts hadn't gone leaping off far ahead of tonight as hers had. He'd probably bolt and run if she appeared to give his

nonsense a serious thought. And with reason, too. It was important to accept the invitation as casually as he had given it.

"I was thinking—" she began.

"Thinking what, Kathleen?"

"—how I'd look going out for dinner with you."

He laughed, a hearty laugh of genuine amusement.

"There's a woman for you! I thought it was conscience and it's clothes! In this storm, who cares? Who cares, anyway? I like that pink pinafore. All right then, smock. Now take your mind off trifles and let's get on with this alibi, though I wish there needn't be one. How about telling your mother—"

But the thoughts she hadn't expressed remained. They nibbled, like worrying insects, at her mind, while he blithely invented excuses. She wished she'd had the courage to ask him to call for her at home. Sneaking, even with Don, seemed cheap, the sort of thing Evvie Leonard had done, that other town girls did when they kept forbidden dates with the students. She was lowering herself to their level. She'd done that last spring, and had despised herself, had escaped tragedy by a hair's breadth. She was spoiling something which, in her dreams and anticipations, at least, should have been beautiful. She was letting herself in for sneaking, worry, lies—

She might have gotten around Dad somehow. Mother would not have been difficult. Mother was romantic and susceptible to charm. She might have flatly stated her intentions and fought down opposition. She wasn't a child who could be spanked and put to bed. Dad would have been angry. But he wouldn't have locked her in her room. If she'd had the courage—

But she hadn't the courage. She hadn't dared let Don go to her home and meet her family. She was ashamed of them, that was it, and ashamed of being ashamed.

Too late now. She had committed herself. Conflicting emotions nearly spoiled her pleasure in the prospect of having dinner with Don.

Nearly—but not quite.

Chapter Seven

SECRET MEETING

SHE HAD COMMITTED HERSELF. But worries diminished when she sat beside Don in his car with a warm robe tucked snugly around her and the rain falling in a slanting sheet beyond the headlights. She hadn't liked waiting for him at the old trolley station beyond the campus, though it was no longer in use and the leaky roof was a protection of sorts. She hadn't dared have him meet her downtown after she'd told Dad she was going up to Thelma's. She'd felt uneasy about Thelma, too. Thelma had asked a good many questions. She'd have to tell Thelma something. Well, maybe the truth.

"We'll run out to the Pheasant Inn," Don said, as they left the town behind. "Unless there's somewhere you'd rather go."

"No, that's fine," she agreed, her spirits lifting beyond the reach of worrying insects. She'd frequently passed the Pheasant Inn on the shore road. It was the place behind the wall with the golden pheasant swinging over the grilled iron gate. She'd suggested to Joe that they stop there one day. But Joe had laughed and said, "That's too rich for our blood, Kathie. Thanks for the compliment but I'm a hired hand working for your Pa." Don was taking her there. The knowledge restored her self-esteem. There were places like Mike's where they might have gone. He couldn't think less of her for sneaking and telling lies if he was taking her to the Pheasant Inn. He had assisted with the sneaking, of course, and had, himself, invented the lies. It was comforting, nevertheless, to know that he valued her company above a ham-burger at a dog-wagon.

"Do you like frog legs?" he asked.

"Mercy! To eat?"

He laughed at her shocked exclamation. "They're fine eating," he said. "They do them well at the Pheasant. Nowhere better, except in New Orleans, perhaps. There's a place in the French quarter there—"

He described a restaurant in New Orleans. He spoke of other specialties of the establishment, pronouncing French names with an accustomed ease which impressed her. Not that he meant to be impressive. His manner was neither condescending nor faintly suggestive of bragging. He paid her the compliment of assuming, or appearing to assume, that she was as familiar as he was with foreign-sounding food, with inns and hotels and oyster bars scattered through the South.

She wasn't, of course. She hadn't been anywhere, really, except once to St. Louis to visit Dad's sister, Aunt Lotta; to Washington with the high school seniors; to Boston by boat with Hilda two summers ago; and on an excursion to Niagara Falls with Mother and Dad when she was a child.

The trip to Boston was the best. They'd been two nights and a day on the boat each way. She hadn't known how closely the small ship followed the coastline. But, after all, land had been out of sight and she'd imagined they were crossing the ocean. She'd loved leaning over the rail to watch the bow of the boat cut through the waves. She'd loved the smell of the sea, the wind and the warm sunlight, the stars at night, different from land stars because, with nothing to interfere, you saw the patterns and designs all at once pricked against darkness above your head.

She'd tried to share her delight with Hilda. But Hilda had sat in a deck chair all day reading tourist guides to Boston and marking on a map the historical spots they must visit to make the trip "worth while."

"I don't see how we can do it all in two days," Hilda said, worried conscientiously, her back to the sunset which made rainbows in flying jets of spray, so lovely that Kathleen's throat had felt tight.

But though her experience had been limited, her imagination had no boundaries. As Don talked, small bright pictures formed and dissolved against the dark. He saw the places he spoke of, piecing together descriptions she'd read, fragments from movie travelogues, photographs in news magazines, adding touches of pure invention. Picture post cards, maybe, flat and impossibly colored. But they gave her a sociable feeling of having shared experiences with him.

This was a part of it, she thought, luxuriously nestled against leather upholstery under the soft thick robe. This was a part of the dream, being with someone who freed her imagination and widened her horizons, someone to whom what the family considered "fine airs" was an accustomed way of life.

"Well, that was quite a dissertation," Don said, the somewhat self-conscious laugh he gave breaking in through her thoughts. "A Cook's Tour of the South, to make a very bad pun. You'll think I'm greedy. Are you as hungry as I am?"

"Starving—"

"Good!" The comment expressed approval. "I like to feed hungry girls. It's a solid satisfaction. There's nothing so disconcerting as to watch a young lady trifle with curls of lettuce and Melba toast. Especially when I'm hungry enough to eat an ox. Don't disappoint me."

She hoped her appetite would not disappoint him. She hoped she'd be able to eat when they reached the Inn. Even frog legs, if that would please him. Food seemed unimportant, though. She wasn't sure she'd been truthful when she told him she was starving. She would have been contented to ride on and on, hearing his pleasant

voice through, the purr of the motor, the rain on the top of the car. Here, with her shoulder touching his, cut off from outside contacts by canvas and glass and falling rain, nothing could spoil what was happening, neither her inexperience nor his observations. When he turned into the parking area beside the Inn, the worrying insects started nibbling again. She'd never been a guest here or in any place like it. Besides, when they went inside, she'd have to take off her coat—

But she needn't have worried. He helped her remove her raincoat and handed it to the hovering—well, waiter, she supposed, who had opened the door. He escorted her to a seat on a chest in the wide, red-carpeted hall and removed her galoshes, too. When he rose and took her hands to draw her to her feet, his glance was entirely approving.

"Here we are," he said and tucked her hand under his arm. There was a long mirror against the opposite wall, lit by a chandelier with crystal prisms. They walked toward it, his hand covering her hand which rested against his arm. "Nice-looking couple," he observed. "What do you think, Fred?"

"Very handsome, indeed, sir," the hovering waiter agreed.

She felt her cheeks flush and heard embarrassment in her laugh. But Don's eyes, in the mirror, twinkled reassuringly and he gave her hand a friendly squeeze. She didn't know you talked to waiters like that, especially to a waiter so obviously superior, so glittering with broadcloth and polish and starch. There was a great deal she didn't know. But she intended to learn.

"A table for two, Mr. Alexander?" the waiter asked. "You can have your choice. We have very few patrons tonight."

"Don't rush us, Fred." He paused with her before the mirror, smiling away her embarrassment. "We'll have a

little something to ward off chills in your fancy parlor. Scotch and soda for me and a Bacardi for Miss Miller. After that, we'll see. Give us time. We want to admire ourselves."

The waiter bowed himself out of sight.

"You're dreadful," she said.

"Am I? You're nice. Also extremely pretty. I like the way you look."

She didn't think much of her appearance. She'd had this dark wool suit two years. It looked pretty school-girlish with the pink angora sweater and the round white collar on the blouse underneath. The beret, no bigger than a skull cap, added to the juvenile effect. Her slippers consoled her a little. They had high heels and fashionable platform soles which increased her height. She saw herself as she would have liked to look standing there with her hand on Don's arm. The vision was clear for a moment, then melted away before she had made a mental list of details. But the vision she'd glimpsed in the mirror, though blond and more slightly built, had an amazing resemblance to the girl who had waited for Don in his car, the girl whose name was Joan.

"Does your hair curl like this naturally?" He touched where it curved up from her shoulders. "Or shouldn't I ask?"

"When it rains. This is fine weather for mermaids."

"You remembered that?" He seemed surprised and pleased as well as amused. "I think I was mistaken, though." His eyes, in the mirror, appraised her reflection. "I was misled by your hair. I'm sure you have a soul. And though there may just possibly be a question of that, I *know* you have lovely legs." He drew her from the mirror. "Where's our friend Fred? I feel a chill coming on."

That disposed of the little mermaid. She could forget the story now. Silly to have been disturbed by a fairy

tale, she thought, walking with Don across the hall and into a room where a fire burned in a grate and drawn curtains shut out the storm. She had been disturbed, though. The story of the mermaid who had suffered agonies to change herself into a mortal had made a deep and persistent impression. The little mermaid had left her garden under the sea for love of the prince who had treated her charmingly but had not loved her. She'd tried to live in an environment unfamiliar to her and had broken her heart and her body had dissolved into foam.

Silly to have made a comparison. She sat beside Don on a sofa near the hearth, only half hearing his joking comments upon the effect the room had upon his emotional temperament. That he had spoken of the fairy tale wasn't important, the thought had continued. Her appearance had reminded him of an illustration he'd seen. That was all. She had, she supposed, the fragile, thistledown sort of prettiness that was the accepted idea of the heroine of a fairy tale. Blue eyes, fair hair, delicate coloring completed the picture. Absurd to have felt a stir of premonition when she had read the story. That was the Irish in her, perhaps, a legacy from Mother's forebears who, according to Mother, were gifted with second sight and lived by a complicated ritual of warnings and signs. Her common sense ridiculed superstition. But the Irish strain in her temperament was very persuasive. If Don had been moved to put her in a fairy tale, she couldn't help wishing that he had selected one with a happy ending.

The waiter came in with a tray.

"Will you trust me to order dinner?" Don asked. "No frog legs. I promise."

This was a part of it, too, she thought, admiring his easy but positive manner with the waiter. She sat turning the stem of the glass in her hand, warm and relaxed, but

excited as well, her mind weaving the past and the present into a bright pattern of thoughts. This, too, was a part of the dream. This room, the fire in the grate, music coming softly from somewhere beyond the open door, Don's tweed suit, the smoke from his cigarette, the waiter's hovering concern for their comfort, were all a part of the dream.

She could not have defined it, then. She'd had no experience to give substance and shape to longings and desires. When, as a child, she'd wished on a hay wagon, the first star, a new moon glimpsed over her shoulder, it had been for things within her experience: white kid slippers, a coral necklace, snow for Christmas, the lace paper valentine in the bookshop window. But even then there'd been wishes she hadn't words to express. She'd had no release for instincts and emotions except in dainty habits and fastidious whims which caused Mother to comment frequently, "Look at the fine lady with her airs!" Even then she'd felt a lack in the pleasures which satisfied her playmates. Years ago, before Dad had built the house in town, when they'd lived on the farm, she'd wanted something beyond her experience, a way of life less restricted, more ordered and gracious and yet with greater freedom than the life her family lived.

The waiter stirred up the coals in the grate and left the room. Don held his glass toward her.

"Happy days," he said.

"Happy days!" she echoed and held her small glass to the tall one. The rims touching made a tinkling sound and a bell rang in her heart. The tiny clear chime reminded her of a glass ornament on a Christmas tree long ago, silver and pink, with a clapper no larger than a raindrop.

Now why had she thought of that?

It was because she felt, now, as she'd felt in that breathlessly exciting moment before she opened her eyes

to look at the tree long ago when she was a very small child. She'd kept them closed tightly when she went with the others into the room where the tree stood, frantic with impatience but delaying the delight of her first glimpse of the silver-woven green boughs, the shining ornaments, the real candles, each with a misty halo outlining the tiny flame. The first peep through half-closed eyes was the most exciting and no amount of looking afterward gave her quite the same joyous delight.

So she sat quietly in a corner of the sofa, sipping her cocktail slowly, making the first moments of being alone with Don in this softly lit, richly furnished room last as long as she could. No other time with him would be quite the same because this was the first. She was conscious of a feeling of satisfaction which made her feel silky and smooth from her head to her toes. This was what she had wanted when she'd refused thick slices of bread Mother spread with jam, when she'd demanded the cup with rosebuds for her cocoa and a thin glass for her milk. The drawn curtains shutting out the storm, Don lounging beside her, his long legs stretched out to the hearth, talking idly but aware of her, wanting to interest and please her, satisfied the emotion that made her breath catch in her throat when she walked past the college chapel and saw the spire, lovely as a chord of music, laced over with summer foliage or etched clearly against a frosty sky. She felt that, at last, she had some small share in that other world, the world which revolved around the college, which had seemed to her, an outsider, full and free and beautiful in contrast with her own limited existence.

Not all of it was beautiful. She'd discovered that last spring when restlessness had rushed her into a brief intimacy with Evvie Leonard. Furtive dates with the sort of students who were attracted to Evvie had proved disappointing. She'd thought that to be privileged to

ness in and out of the ivy-covered buildings, to live in a house on Fraternity Row, must confer an especial distinction. She'd been shocked by rude manners, swaggering, flippant jokes. She'd known, long before the accident, that the only contact she was likely to have with the college was shabby and second-rate. She'd hated it from the first date she'd had with Evvie and those boys who'd taken them to Mike's—

A coal dropped in the grate. Don's voice broke a silence she'd scarcely noticed until the sound the coal made had attracted her attention.

"What are you thinking?" he asked. "You sit there so quietly. Don't you like your drink? I should have asked you what you wanted instead of ordering for you."

"I like it. It's fine. What were you thinking, just now, before you spoke?"

"Fair enough." He laughed lazily. "I asked you. I was thinking what a horrible death it must be to die of slow starvation. That disappoints you, doesn't it?"

She looked up and met his smiling glance. "Why?" she asked.

"You looked disappointed and I'm sorry." Teasing glints danced in his eyes. "I'll try to do better later. I can't think fancy thoughts when I'm hungry. But you haven't answered my question. What were you thinking when I asked?"

She wouldn't have told him. But she was spared the need to invent a substitute. The waiter appeared, just then, and told them that their dinner was ready to serve.

Did men think of the same things that girls did? she wondered, walking with Don out into the hall and across the dining-room with the waiter moving ahead like a courier clearing the way for a royal procession. Did Don sometimes think of his childhood as she had thought, when their glasses touched, of the pink and silver bell which had hung on a Christmas tree long ago? He had

recalled the mermaid story, of course, reminded of it by her fair hair and deep blue eyes.

Men didn't apply the past to the present though, she supposed. They weren't constantly searching for meanings in trivial gestures and remarks. Girls did, even girls who weren't plagued by an Irish strain in their temperament which, in spite of common sense, kept watching for warnings and signs. He'd thought of food while her thoughts shuttled between the present and the past. Silly to have felt a little disappointed when he had told her. He was hungry. She was beyond any conscious interest in food. The way she felt, light and floating and vibrating with excitement, she was sure she wouldn't be able to eat a bite.

But the food was delicious. It came in a chafing dish with alcohol burning in blue jets of flame under polished silver. The waiter named Fred served them himself while two waiters, of apparently lesser degree, assisted with the ritual. She felt very elegant, being so ceremoniously attended, and watched Don in darting glances to be sure she made no mistakes.

"Do you like it?" He smiled at her across silver and glass and china set on a white expanse of tablecloth. The imposing headwaiter had vanished and the two lesser flunkys had retired to a discreet but hovering distance. She was conscious of them, though; conscious, too, of Don's amused and interested expression. He was curious about her reactions, she thought, using Hilda's word, but in a friendly and pleasant way, like observing a child's pleasure in some unusual treat.

"Oh, yes," she said, wondering what the pale wine bubbling in a stemmed glass would do to her and what the curls of lacy green in the salad were and how they made the butter into such cunning shapes—calla lilies, roses, baskets of flowers.

"Prove it, then," he said. "You're pecking like a hun-

mingbird. You told me an hour ago that you were starved."

She did her best. But her glance kept straying around the room. It was dimly lit and richly furnished as that other room had been. A carpet and hangings of rich ruby red hushed footfalls, voices, the clink and clatter of silver and glass. Chandeliers made reflections on the surface of the narrow rectangle of dance floor. The orchestra, playing on a small platform edged with ferns and palms, might have been giving a command performance for her and Don.

He caught and held her glance when it returned to him.

"Plushy, isn't it?" he asked.

"It isn't what I expected."

"Too quiet? I'm sorry—"

"Oh, no!" she said quickly. "But I thought— Well, for some reason I associate pheasants with England. That golden bird over the gate. I suppose I've imagined, when I've passed, there'd be beams and oak furniture and game turning on a spit, like in English novels."

"But golden pheasants come from China."

"Do they?"

"Friends of my mother's raise them. They have all varieties. Their country place is next to ours. The Thayers."

Thayer! That girl named Joan—

But she asked no questions. "I like it," she said. "Especially on a rainy night. It's—cozy."

"Intimate is the word. You feel lapped in luxury, don't you?"

"You feel—well, elegant."

"—and romantic. I feel romantic. Do you? This is Ned's idea of old Vienna, I suppose. What is it?"

"What is what?" she asked in surprise.

"The tune the orchestra is playing. You were hum-

ming."

"Was I? And at the table, too. That's bad manners. The music is 'Tales from the Vienna Woods.'"

"You astonish me. How do you know?"

"My father plays it sometimes."

"Is he a musician?"

"He plays the violin. I've known the Strauss waltzes always. His father came from Austria. Our name was Müller, originally. Grandfather changed it to Miller when he became an American citizen."

"Austria?" He displayed a flattering interest. "Then where did you get those Irish eyes?"

"My mother is of Irish descent."

"Oh!" He smiled. "You're an international complication?"

"I hope not."

"I'm afraid so. You're complicating my good intentions, at any rate. I meant to work like a beaver when I came back to college. And look at me—" He pushed back his chair. "Well, there's no help for it, now. Will you dance with me, Kathleen?"

This was a part of it, too, waltzing with Don to the singing strings of cello and violin. They danced well together, though he was much taller than she. The few scattered diners turned to watch them. The violinist smiled at her from the platform and bowed with an extra flourish. The eyes of the waiters followed their movements.

"You're causing a sensation," Don said.

"A very mild one." She laughed, feeling happy and confident. Yes, this was a part of the dream. It wasn't only because she was dancing with Don, she told herself. It wasn't Don, as a person, but what he represented. His easy manner, the good-looking clothes he wore, his familiarity with places like this, satisfied her desire for grace and beauty and elegance. And not that exactly.

father, because such reasons seemed snobbish and grasping. He gave her imagination wings and sharpened her wits and made her feel thrillingly alive. She'd been confident that knowing him would be like this, last spring when he'd brought her home from Mike's, thinking of him through the summer, waiting for him to return—

"Happy, Kathleen?"

She glanced up. He was looking at her. He smiled and she saw the tiny scar at the corner of his eye.

"Oh, yes— Happy—" But she sighed and the music, all at once, sounded sad instead of gay. The Irish streak in her was plaguing her again, watching for warnings and signs. No, that wasn't entirely true. There was a more definite explanation for the sudden droop of her spirits.

She wished she hadn't let him pick her up at the old trolley station tonight. She wished she'd had the courage to have him call for her at home.

Chapter Eight

DISTURBING KISS

HE ACCEPTED HER RESTRICTIONS. He did not speak again of calling at her home. He picked her up at the trolley station or came into the movies, after the picture had started, to sit beside her in the last row of seats under the balcony, or stopped in at the shop. Dad came in one afternoon when he was there.

Dad had been working in the greenhouses. He wore his most disreputable work clothes and an odor of fertilizer clung to his shabby garments. He carried a flat of cyclamen plants, well-budded and ready to bloom.

Don transferred his attention from her to the display case.

"A dozen red roses," he said in the impersonal manner of a customer ordering flowers. "Send them to Mrs. Willie May Washington." He produced a card from his wallet and added a town address.

She had a little difficulty finding her order pad. When she had found it she stood at the slanted shelf where cards to accompany orders were stacked in open partitions and the green blotter bore the blurred imprint of greetings and signatures. Don made pleasant remarks to Dad while she wrote the name and address, then left the shop with a formal, if twinkling, "Good afternoon" to her.

"That's young Alexander," Dad said.

"Is it?" She kept her head bent over the pad, shading the letters in the ridiculous name. He had invented it on the spur of the moment, she thought, amusement struggling against irritation and a disturbing sense of regret. It would serve him right if she sent a dozen red roses,

with his card, to the address he had given her. She wouldn't, of course. His intention had been to provide a smoke screen for her protection. She appreciated his motive but resented his obvious enjoyment of the situation.

"His father was a college trustee," Dad added. "Died last spring."

"Oh, that one? I remember."

"His family, first and last, has contributed a good deal to the college." Dad set the flat of plants on the display table and pulled off his heavy gloves. "Temperature's going down. I wouldn't be surprised if we'd have snow. Whenever I see this young fellow I'm reminded of the Valley."

"You mean—the one who was here?" His card lay on the blotter, a narrow card—*Mr. Donald Grant Alexander*. She ran the tips of her fingers over the lettering, not looking at Dad. "Does he live in the Valley? Did you know him, his family, when you were with Grandfather at the Kincaids'?"

"They have a farm there. They're all pretty thick, those families who live in the Valley. It's a funny thing how the young ones resemble the ones who have passed on. You take the Kincaids, now—"

She had heard a great deal of the Kincaids. Her grandfather had been head gardener for them and Dad had grown up there and Mother's Aunt Ida had been the Kincaids' housekeeper. Mother followed the activities of the family in the newspapers, reporting marriages, births, debutante parties, deaths, with a passionate and personal interest. Strange to think that Don probably knew them intimately, the family who were like characters in a novel to her. Strange that her background and Don's, though so different, should have the same setting—

"It's a look they have." Dad was unusually talkative. He sat on the edge of the display table, where Don had

sat a short time before, and took out his pipe and pouch of tobacco. "Not features," he continued, "or coloring, necessarily. But dark or fair, homely or handsome, they have the same smooth look that comes from generations of polishing, like their silver and furniture I used to see when I took flowers into the house."

Yes, Don had that look of breeding. She knew what Dad meant but she made no comment. She traced profiles on the order pad, wondering why Dad spoke of the Valley, if he suspected that Don was interested in her, how she might encourage him to continue without displaying too great an interest in the subject.

But Dad, apparently, needed no encouragement.

"Their minds were that way, too," he went on reflectively. "All the rough edges rubbed off. Fine people to work for, your grandfather used to say, because once you'd learned how they wanted things done they didn't upset you with changes. The young ones go on in the same way. They marry their own kind. It's mixing characteristics that produces new varieties with people the same as with plants. Those Valley young ones, well, they may sow a wild oat or two in their youth, but when it comes to marriage, there's no grafting allowed."

One Kincaid, at least, had had grafting in mind, Kathleen thought. She wondered if Dad thought of the Kincaid, young when Dad was young, who had, according to family legend, broken Aunt Gertrude's heart. Aunt Gertrude was Dad's youngest sister, the one whom she was said to resemble. The story lost nothing in Mother's telling of it, of course, but she supposed it was founded on fact. They'd been in love with each other, as Mother told the story, and had wanted to marry—pretty Aunt Trudi, the gardener's daughter, and young Kincaid. His parents had interfered and he had, eventually, married a girl of whom they approved. Aunt Trudi had been sent out to Aunt Lotta in St. Louis and had languished

and died. Dad said she'd had some kind of a fever but Mother, romantically, insisted that she had died of a broken heart.

Dad, if he thought of Aunt Trudi, did not speak of the incident. He made a few further comments upon his former employers and the families which owned the adjacent farms in the valley where he had spent his early youth. His attitude toward them aroused a familiar resentment. He spoke of them as though they were as far removed from any personal contact with him or his family as the Windsors of Buckingham Palace. He'd be surprised if he knew, Kathleen thought, listening with interest but with increasing exasperation. She had an impulse to tell him.

But what was there to tell? Nothing, actually, except that she had dates with Don, that he'd taken her out for dinner twice, that he stopped in at the shop to talk to her. His formal but amused "Good afternoon" still disturbed her. That was ridiculous, certainly, because he'd merely deferred to her restrictions. But she wished, quite logically, she admitted, that Don hadn't been so quick to provide a smoke screen, that he hadn't seemed quite so amused.

He was amused when he called her that evening. The telephone, at home, was on the sun porch and it was there that the family sat after supper. She was surprised when she answered the ring and heard his voice. He had not called her at home before. It was likely to be difficult. A telephone call, however personal, was a matter of general interest.

"Is that for me?" Cliff set Junior down on the floor and half rose from his chair. "I'm expecting a call."

"It's for me," Kathleen said, covering the mouthpiece with her hand.

Mother turned the radio down a trifle and divided her attention between the activities of the Aldrich family on

the air waves and her daughter's conversation.

"Hellol This is you, Kathleen." Don's voice, coming across the wire, made her heart beat fast.

"Yes," she said. "This is Kathleen." The cord permitted restricted privacy. She carried the telephone out into the hall, conscious of the attention of the family focused upon her. Her voice, replying to Don, must have betrayed the state of her mind.

"Shouldn't I have called?" he asked. "What is it, a party?"

"Just the radio."

"Oh! Did you send the roses?"

"No. But I should have. It would have served—"

Mother called from the sun porch, "If that's Joe and he's coming out, ask him to bring his mother's recipe for applesauce cake, Kathie."

"I'm listening." Kathleen pressed the palm of her hand against her ear. "Yes, I'm still here."

"I wondered. I meant you to send the roses."

"Did you? I thought you'd made up the name."

He laughed. "Nobody could make up a name like that, not without a good deal of thought. I—"

Dotty started upstairs, hopping from step to step, singing to herself.

"Stop it!" Kathleen hissed in a furious undertone.

"Kathleen!" Don's voice sounded puzzled and less amused. "Where are you? You keep going away."

"I'm here." Her palm pressed so tightly that her ear began to ache.

"I wanted to tell you. Willie May is the cook here at the house." He laughed. "I had to think quickly. I haven't had much experience—"

Bud's voice cut through, calling from the head of the stairs, so that the remainder of the sentence was lost. "Hey, Mom!" Bud shouted. "Where's my new blue shirt? I can't find one with buttons on. Kathie, will you ask

Mom—"

She cut him off with a desperate glance.

"Yes—" she said into the transmitter. "What *were* you saying—? I didn't—"

Don's tone altered. "I shouldn't have called, should I?" he asked. "You sound offended."

"Oh, no!" she protested. "It's just that I can't half hear you."

"I'll wait until I see you, then."

"Yes, please. I'm sorry. Good night."

It wasn't only the interruptions which had disturbed her. She thought it through, later, after she'd let off steam by giving Dotty and Bud a good dressing down. She'd resented his enjoyment of the subterfuge he had used that afternoon. Well, what did she expect? she asked herself as she played a game of Chinese checkers with Mother and Dad when Bud had gone off to a school party and Cliff had taken Rose to the movies and the children were in bed. She, herself, had made the restrictions. It *was* funny, sending red roses to the cook. He had expected her to share his amusement—

She did, in a way. The things which amused him usually amused her, too. That was the bond between them. They laughed a good deal when they were together. "It's fun being with you," he'd told her more than once. "I like to see you laugh. Your eyes nearly close and your nose wrinkles up and you get tears on your lashes. You make me feel entertaining and brilliant and that is gratifying. It makes up for what the law school faculty thinks of my mental attainments."

But you couldn't laugh all the time. Kathleen, thinking absently moved blue marbles across the board. You couldn't think when a relationship was important, when you wanted it to last and weren't sure that it would and your mind kept leaping off into the future. She wondered whether the novelty of having to sneak dates with her

held his continued interest. He told her it was a new experience and she believed him. With his family, the money, his own good looks and charm, he'd probably been encouraged by fathers and fluttered over by mothers, and had sticky fly paper laid out to catch him in countless households—

Maybe she was a wild oat. Dad had said, this afternoon, that the young ones of the Valley families sowed them. But wild oats, to her, meant something a good deal more daring than his relationship with her. She thought of them in terms of champagne and chorus girls and glittering dens of iniquity as pictured in the movies. Still, anything that was forbidden might be considered sowing wild oats, she supposed. The idea amused her, though it disturbed her, too. And amusement banished worrying thoughts. She gave her attention to the game.

"That's the girl," Dad said, as she blocked a play Mother was about to make.

"I'd have been out in one more move," Mother mourned cheerfully. Mother loved games but played them with more enthusiasm than skill. You enjoyed her enjoyment which she expressed in good-natured accusations of cheating when she was losing, in boastful triumph when she won. Dad's quiet nature expanded in the genial warmth and comfortable good cheer of the atmosphere Mother created. He looked at her as though all the brightness and beauty of the world was concentrated in her plump person, chuckled, made an occasional comment, puffed on his pipe.

"I'll let you win next time," Kathleen promised, relaxing in the familiar, feather-bed comfort of home.

"You will, will you?" Mother retorted spiritedly. She pondered the next move, plush cheeks flushed, blue eyes bright, the long double strand of pinkish pearls which cascaded down over her bosom rising and falling with the excitement of making a decision. "The back of my

and to your impudence. Be quiet and let me think. Now, if I move there—"

She'd tell Don some time, perhaps, she thought. "A wild oat on an evening off," she would say, "playing checkers with the home folks." Already the telephone call seemed less of a nightmare than it had. She would explain that, too, laughing, making a joke of family interruptions. Remembering his reluctant "Good night," the expressing tone of his voice, made her feel silky and smooth. "Wild oat, my eye!" he would say, perhaps. "You look as wild as a stick of peppermint candy. And just as gay and sweet. What's this about wild oats, anyway? Who's been taking you to the movies while my back was turned?"

His replies to her remarks were not always exactly as she had imagined. But they were satisfactory. His compliments pleased her. She liked the way he watched her when they were together, usually with amusement in his bright dark eyes but with approval, too. His expression often suggested that he had invented her and was pleased with the result. But he was sometimes critical. There was the matter of her hair.

She'd had it done at the beauty shop for her second dinner at the Pheasant Inn. She'd thought it looked smart, with the row of curls over her forehead, under the round upturned brim of a halo hat. She'd borrowed Thelma's coat, one of the new chubby numbers of some kind of glossy long-haired fur. Seeing herself in the mirror of Thelma's dresser, she'd been pleased with her appearance.

"It looks better on you than it does on me," Thelma had said regretfully. Thelma was a little on the heavy side and working at Hartman's didn't help. She always meant not to eat lunches but there they were and the Hartman pastry was a college tradition. Thelma had lovely skin like peaches and cream, big brown eyes, and

a generous nature. She'd been her, Kathleen's, best friend through high school and was interested in her friendship with Don. Kathleen hadn't told her much but Thelma was impressed and excited and eager to be of assistance.

"I wish you had let me mascara your lashes, though," Thelma had said, surveying the completed effect with admiration. Thelma's own lashes were beaded which made her look like a chubby doll. "I could do it, now, in a minute. You'd look wonderful. Your lashes are so long."

But Kathleen declined mascara.

It was nearly dark when Don met her at the trolley station, a clear frosty twilight deepening into night.

"Is this Goldilocks or the bear?" he asked, opening the door of his car for her, tucking her in under the robe.

He hadn't noticed her hair, at first. But his comment about the coat, though laughingly made, put a damper on her spirits. It was a mistake to have borrowed it, she supposed. It probably looked and felt cheap to him, though Thelma referred to it proudly as "my silver fox." Well, if he didn't like the way she looked—

The spark of indignation burned bravely for a moment, then spluttered out. No use telling herself that she didn't care what he thought. She cared a great deal.

He was more outspoken about her hair.

"Whose idea was this?" he asked. They stood before the long mirror in the hall at the Pheasant Inn as they had stood before. The red carpet felt as luxurious under her feet. The crystal chandelier shone with the same soft brilliance. The music from the dining-room had the same singing lilt. But, for a time, the enchantment of the first visit was lost. This was different, changed—

"Whose idea was what?" She pretended not to understand though she knew very well what he meant.

"The hair-do—" He smiled but his brows drew together in a frown which was not entirely assumed.

"Mine, of course. Don't you like it?"

"No," he said frankly, "I don't."

"Then I wasted a dollar. I thought—" But she couldn't maintain the light tone. Her voice faltered, humiliatingly, and she looked away.

"Kathleen!" he said quickly. He turned her to face him, his hands on her shoulders. "Don't be offended."

"I'm not offended."

"You are and I'm sorry." His voice was contrite. "I wouldn't hurt your feelings for the world. It's just that you're lovely with your hair the way you usually wear it. Look at me."

She glanced up and saw that he was distressed.

"I don't like those sausage curls," he said, "but I do like you. Am I forgiven?"

"Yes—"

"Say it as though you mean it."

"I do mean it." She smiled.

"That's better." His face brightened. The frown disappeared and teasing glints shone in his eyes. "But keep away from beauty shops just the same. If you don't, I'll spank you."

She wore her hair as he liked it, brushing it a hundred strokes every night to make it shine. She remembered his slightest comment, making personal applications even when she knew he had intended no criticism. He said that blood-red nails reminded him of savages so she changed her polish to a shade more delicate than she ordinarily used. He remarked upon costumes worn in the movies and she gave the halo hat to Rose and wore the plain dark suit he liked until she was sick of the sight of it. He grimaced at a whiff of strong perfume and she no longer sprayed her hair with the atomizer filled with "Toujour L'amour" which Joe gave her for her birthday.

She made mental notes when she was with him, cor-

recting her pronunciation of certain words, learning new ones. When he touched upon a subject with which she was unfamiliar, she looked up the reference, spending hours at the library. He might not speak of those subjects again but she was prepared if he should. She learned, in that way, that Gilbert Stuart was an American artist who had painted a portrait of George Washington and also of one of Don's ancestors, that the Borgias were a powerful and murderous family in medieval Italy, that bouillabaisse was a sort of fish stew with oysters and crab meat in it and should be served with toast.

He usually went home after his last class on Saturday and returned Sunday evening. He told her his mother was lonely since his father's death and liked to have him with her. That, apparently, did not prevent him from joining in social affairs. She read reviews of plays he might possibly see, newspaper accounts of hunt meetings or dog shows, asking Dad to explain the technical terms. If he mentioned his week-end activities when he returned, she did not parade the odds and ends of information she had acquired. But it gave her assurance to recognize the names and terms he used.

He talked to her as though she was as familiar as he was with the interests and the obligations which being a son in his family entailed. He was never condescending and seldom explained, though he must have known that the charities in which his mother was prominent, the debutante parties given for his younger cousins, the breeding of horses and dogs, the Cricket Club, badminton, backgammon, squash, were so much Greek to her. She liked learning. She was adaptable. If sometimes a realization of how closely she patterned her thoughts and conduct to conform to his aroused an uneasy question, she dismissed it from her mind. If sometimes, not wanting to make mistakes, she was conscious of strain,

she did not admit it. Only the secretive nature of her relationship with Don actually disturbed her. She wished she might have dates with him openly, that Mother and Dad knew and approved.

She gave a good deal of thought to clothes. She pored over the society pages of the Sunday paper.

"It's a good thing their families have money," Thelma observed commenting upon the photographs of the current crop of debutantes. She and Kathleen were spending Sunday afternoon in Kathleen's room with the society pages of the paper spread out on the bed between them. Most of them you wouldn't notice in a crowd. Plain-looking, aren't they?"

"Oh, I don't know," Kathleen said. "This one has an interesting face." She wouldn't have expressed the thought in those words a few weeks ago. She was learning to use Don's adjectives, "interesting," "charming," "amusing," "pleasant." Formerly "pretty," "wonderful," "swell" had seemed adequate.

"Martha Dixon Moore," Thelma read, not knowing that the camera shot was of one of Don's cousins. "Even their names are plain. I can't hand her much. No 'oomph,' if you know what I mean. And she'll probably land a millionaire!" Thelma sighed.

They looked at fashion advertisements.

"That's a good-looking coat," Kathleen said, thinking that Don would like it. At least it appeared to be identical with the coat Martha Dixon Moore wore as she strolled through Rittenhouse Square.

"That?" Thelma was scornful. "Not even a wisp of hair. Honestly with all the money they have would you think they'd dress like grammar school kids? Don't they ever go the movies? Good grief!"

Thelma followed Hollywood styles religiously, adding touches of her own. Her silk dresses usually fitted her plump figure snugly and were of shades which she called

"lipstick red," "autumn mist," "persimmon," "dubonnet." She wore a good deal of costume jewelry, veils, sheer stockings, slippers with very high heels and cutout toes. Thelma was working at Hartman's until Emil's father loosened up and paid him a salary that would insure the apartment which Thelma coveted in the new Waverly Arms. In the meantime, though she occasionally embroidered a staggering monogram on a towel, she spent what she earned for clothes and trusted in Providence and her family for the more practical necessities.

Kathleen was fond of Thelma. But Thelma was no help to her in making the decisions that had assumed great importance. She relied upon Martha Dixon Moore's taste, instead, because in camera shots and photographs, at least, she appeared to be similar in size and type. She cut out advertisements, assembling a wardrobe of which she thought Don would approve. Just before Christmas she drew her savings account from the bank and made a trip to the

The shop mentioned in the advertisement awed her. She and Hilda had walked past it but had never gone in. It was lovely, all gray and apricot and shining plate glass. She wished, though, at first, that she'd gone to the department store where Hilda shopped. The prices she saw on the small discreet tags made her head reel. She did mental sums and subtractions and felt panicky when a salesgirl in gray with touches of apricot approached her.

But the girl was pleasant and helpful. She seemed to know from Kathleen's somewhat incoherent explanations exactly what she wanted. The dark blue reefer, soft but warm enough to wear through the winter, fitted beautifully. The felt hat with the rolling brim made her look like a schoolgirl but was becoming. She could afford only one dress, when she'd reserved the price of shoes, and gloves, and a handbag. The one the salesgirl produced

... nice, sheer dark wool with a flared skirt and a plain waist, buttoned trimly down the front, with cuffs and a round collar of a crisp white material edged with pleated lace.

"That's very nice," the girl said with admiration in her voice. "You could wear it out just as it is. A size twelve fits perfectly. The dark blue sets off your hair and your skin."

She wore them out of the shop. She walked down Chestnut Street feeling like a million. The fact that the salesgirl had asked her if the purchases were to be charged added to her satisfaction. She admired her reflection in store windows as she passed and tried to forget that she'd spent nearly all of the money she'd saved and would have to skimp on Christmas presents for the family. She knew she should call Hilda but it was pleasant to be alone. Hilda would be sure to ask her what she paid for everything and remind her that white chammois gloves weren't practical and that she could have "done better" at the department store where Hilda shopped.

She went into Schrafft's for lunch and saw heads turn to watch her as she passed glass-topped tables where girls and women sat in groups. When she slipped off her coat, she dropped it carelessly on the leather bench so that the label showed. The waitress was gratifyingly attentive and she ordered the most expensive luncheon. While she waited, she sat looking at herself in the mirrored wall opposite. She and the salesgirl and Martha Dixon Moore had achieved an effect. Her hair was lovely under the rolling brim of the hat and the dark dress with the sheer pleated collar and cuffs had an air of simple elegance which made her look fragile and cherished and right. Don would approve. He would like her in this. Thinking of him made her impatient to return home so that she hurried through the luncheon, scarcely tasting what she

ate.

He did not disappoint her. "Hello!" he said when he saw her in her new clothes. "Have we met before or am I mistaken?"

It was a cold clear Sunday afternoon. He hadn't gone home for the week-end. He'd called her late in the morning and asked her to meet him at the usual place at half-past two. She'd half promised Joe to take a walk with him. She called him and made excuses. Dad and Mother had driven into the city to see Aunt Ida who was an old lady, now, and lived with Mother's sister, Aunt Kate. They wouldn't be home until late in the evening. Rose and Cliff and the children were visiting Cliff's brother in Trenton. For once she would have no explanations to make. She hadn't seen Don since early in the week. She couldn't wait to show off her new clothes.

"I've been shopping," she said, watching his face.

"So I see." He stepped back to admire her.

"Do you like them?" She couldn't help asking the question though she wanted to be casual. She couldn't keep from smiling.

"Both them and you." He smiled, too, and his eyes, taking her all in, were soft and bright. "You look as though you'd stepped off the cover of a magazine. Where shall we take that hat and coat? They deserve consideration."

He tucked the robe around her with especial care, then leaned into the car and kissed her before he closed the door.

Yes, she and the salesgirl and Martha Dixon Moore had achieved quite an effect. He hadn't kissed her before. She wished that he had the night she'd borrowed Thelma's coat and had her hair done in curls. She'd been the same, then, inside, as she was now. It was disturbing to feel, as she did for a moment, that he had kissed her because her new clothes were like those the girls he knew

more, that the effect was more important than she was, that—

Well, she'd spent her last cent to that purpose, hadn't she? The small flare of independence, of sensitive and probably silly pride, dimmed and vanished as it had on other occasions. She settled back contentedly when Don started the car, happy to be with him, proud of herself in her new clothes, remembering the touch of his lips—

The dream had come true and she wasn't satisfied. The stars in their courses had planned this afternoon for her. She decided that she was ungrateful and very hard to please.

Chapter Nine

A SHATTERED ILLUSION

THEY DROVE TO ATLANTIC CITY. She said she wanted to smell the ocean and Don said he'd heard that the boardwalk offered excellent facilities for parading new clothes. The air was cold and crisp but the sun was warm and the sky was a lovely blue. They walked briskly at first, keeping close to the rail so they could watch the waves curl up on the beach.

"You're fond of oceans, Miss Miller?"

"I'm not acquainted with any but this one."

"The Pacific has its points."

"I've heard. I wouldn't know."

"Let's do a tour of oceans, you and I."

You and I! "Couldn't we skip the frozen ones?"

"We must be thorough. That's what the faculty keeps telling me."

"I don't think I'd care for icebergs."

"You'd look sweet in one of those—what do they call them? Those fur hoods like the Eskimo boys in the ginger ale ads wear."

"Would I?" She glanced up at him, eyes shining, cheeks pink with the cold.

"That isn't fair. You should warn me."

"Of what?"

"When you look up quickly like that, it does something queer to my breath."

She laughed gaily in disbelief.

"No, I mean it." He drew her arm more securely through his. "You must learn to take me seriously. Are you warm enough in your new coat?"

"Oh, yes—"

"Sweet! Pretty Kathleen—"

The sun sank low against the horizon, dipped, as they watched, into the sea. The wide beach was pink and golden in the afterglow. Twilight dimmed the sky slowly. Lights came on, bright beads strung along an invisible chain.

"Would you like to ride?" Don asked as they turned. "Here's a chair."

"I like to walk."

"Do you? That's fine. So do I."

Shop windows attracted their attention now that dusk darkened the sea. They walked more slowly, stopping to comment upon marvels displayed in a dazzle of light behind shining plate glass.

"Look, Don! They're real butterflies made into jewelry. How do they do it?"

"Black magic, probably. Would you like to have one of those pins?"

"No, thank you. I'd like to bring them alive. Think how they'd look fluttering in the window. All the colors and soft moving wings."

"I imagine the blonde would be considerably startled. It might scare some expression into her face. Are you interested in prayer rugs?"

"Is he a Hindu, really, do you suppose?"

"The coffee-colored gent? Certainly. He's wearing a turban, isn't he? Come along. If he sees you, he'll want you for his harem."

"Look, Don! The little figures. They're made of bees-wax."

"Very remarkable."

"But they are! See the fish in the man's basket."

"Speckled trout."

"Are they? Do they catch speckled trout in Mexico?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

Her own ideas of Mexico were sketchy, derived from

the movies, from books she had read, from photographs in news magazines. You rode on donkeys, didn't you, over mountain trails and bandits in sombreros lurked behind cactus plants as tall as trees. But did cactus grow on mountain trails? "South of the Border" ran through her mind and, lingering before the display in the window, she walked with Don along crooked, climbing streets, past low plaster houses painted in chalky pastel shades. Strings of peppers and silver-skinned onions hung against the walls and vines blossomed with tropical flowers. Mission bells rang in the fancy, mixed with Hawaiian music from the Steel Pier, the indistinct sounds of waves, footsteps thudding or tapping on the boardwalk. "It's fun being with you, Kathleen. You are the light I see by. Keep shining just for me."

But Don's voice, recalling her from Mexico, was a great deal less tender than it had sounded in the fancy. He was greeting acquaintances, obviously. She turned, a little startled.

A chair was turning in from the promenade toward the shop before which they stood. The girls, both calling to Don, sat in the enclosure provided by the top and sides of the chair and, between them, a rosy, somewhat rotund, very amiable-looking young man. Kathleen recognized the girl in the dark fur coat immediately. That was strange. She'd seen her only once before. Then she'd worn a green hat with a feather stuck through the high peaked crown. Now, a fur pillbox rested jauntily upon waves of red-brown hair. She saw, now, that the fur was beaver and that the girl's eyes were sea green, as Don had described them. They were fascinating eyes, oddly tilted at the corners, with lashes that looked bronze as the light fell upon them.

This was Joan Thayer and she was beautiful, though, at the moment, her expression was astonished and, despite the curving red-lipped smile, certainly displeased.

Kathleen glanced up at Don, wondering what effect the encounter had upon him. His face told her nothing. He had removed his hat and was smiling. His hand remained cupped lightly over her elbow as he made introductions.

"Miss Thayer, Miss Kincaid, Mr. Wayne."

The girls made polite responses. The rotund young man displayed less reserve.

"I never know what to do in cases like this," he apologized cheerfully. "If I attempt to rise, as a gentleman should, I'll probably tip the cursed thing over. I'll get tangled up in the robe, certainly. Hasn't anybody established a convention for accepting an introduction to a young lady from a rolling chair?"

"You might consult Emily Post, Ding?" the second girl suggested. She was a Kincaid, apparently. Mother would know which one. She might be the daughter of the son of the family who had wanted to marry Aunt Gertrude. A pity he hadn't, she thought, for the girl was decidedly plain. She was lean, rather than slender, and her cheekbones were prominent. Her skin had a weathered look as though she'd never heard of face creams and lotions. She wore a heavy tweed coat and a felt hat pulled on any old way over close-cropped curly hair. Her eyes were attractive, though, a clear hazel, keen and humorous, and her wide smile, showing strong white teeth, was friendly and pleasant.

"Fancy meeting you here, Donald." Joan Thayer's voice was cool and well-bred but the laugh she gave had an edge.

"I'm quite as surprised as you are." Don's grip upon her elbow did not relax. She was grateful for that. Conscious of the openly appraising glance of the sea-green eyes, of the Kincaid girl's less personal interest, she thanked her lucky stars that the meeting hadn't taken place before she'd bought her new clothes.

"It's a small world," the rotund young man said with twinkling gravity. "Or has that been said before?"

"You're slipping, Ding," the Kincaid girl said. "I'm ashamed of you."

"Are you staying here," Don asked, "or down for the day?"

"Ann and Ding are down for the day. I've been here nearly a week." The red lips twisted into a pretty grimace. "Aunt Lydia felt the need of sea air and it was my turn. We're buried alive in an old ladies' home. You know Aunt Lydia's favorite hotel. It hasn't changed in twenty years. Shawls and knitting and bridge and dusty palms in tubs. The glee club from the Girls' Industrial Home gave a concert last night."

"You have my sympathy." Don laughed. "Not that you deserve it. You haven't sent the customary post card."

"I sent you two at home. I didn't know you were staying at college over the week-end."

"I'm boning for exams, the ones I should have taken last June."

"Oh!" Butterfly brows arched in dainty derision. "Giving them absent treatment, I suppose."

"You do me a grave injustice. Kathleen is my tutor. She asks me questions as we walk the boards. I think faster on my feet and the sea air blows the cobwebs out of my brain."

"That was a quick one," the Kincaid girl—Ann?—commented, laughing. Joan Thayer laughed, too, but without much humor in the light rippling sound.

"Very pretty." Kathleen wasn't sure whether the young man they called Ding meant her or Don's nonsense. His glance rested upon her appreciatively. "Why don't we all have dinner together," he suggested. "But not, heaven forbid, at Miss Lydia's hotel."

Kathleen held her breath for an instant.

"No, thank you," Don said. She was relieved but,

oddly, a little disappointed as well. "We can't have the tutoring interrupted by idle chatter. Well, nice to have seen you—"

They lingered, caught in farewells. Joan Thayer reminded Don of engagements for the Christmas vacation, now nearly at hand. There had been a row, she said, because the Harrisons had sent out invitations for Ellen's dance for the same night as the ice carnival and Tippy—whoever Tippy was—was bringing two friends home from school so that the atmosphere would be juvenile and she hoped Mother would take the young out to the farm. Ann—yes, it was Ann—Kincaid told Don they were spending Christmas at the farm because "Honey-Child's" litter was expected and "Wave Along's" colt was ready to break and she had to get the "Duke of Argyle" into coat for the Westminster show. She was sorry Don's mother had decided against the farm for the holidays but she would expect him out to see what he thought of the new pup. Oh yes, and did he know Tracey wasn't showing "Fancy Girl" until Baltimore which she considered a mistake—

Kathleen waited in silence, a small smile frozen on her lips, confused by the unfamiliar jargon, each item of which appeared to be of interest to Don. Of course he was interested. The activities they mentioned, interrupting each other to get a last word in, were his real life. She had no share in it and he didn't intend she should have. If he had wanted to include her, he would have taken her to dinner with his friends. Not that she wanted to go. It would be more pleasant with him alone. But at least she would have had the assurance that he wasn't ashamed of her, that he trusted her to hold her own—

She murmured replies to polite expressions of their pleasure in meeting her. She stood watching, with Don's hand on her arm, while the Negro trundled the chair

back into the promenade. But her spirits felt weighted with lead. The day, their day together, was spoiled by the encounter.

"Where do you want to eat?" Don asked. "No, that's against my principles. Never ask a girl where she wants to go. Take her places."

He was pleasant and friendly. He drew her arm through his as they turned to walk on along the boardwalk. But the day was spoiled just the same. There were no more exclamations, no nonsense, no laughter. Don was silent, apparently absorbed in thought. Though he walked beside her, accommodating his long strides to her shorter ones, she felt as though he had gone in the opposite direction with his friends, that she, in her brave new clothes, walked alone. The silence became unbearable.

"Your friend—" she asked, after she had discarded a dozen equally meaningless questions. "Why do they call him 'Ding'?"

"What—" he asked absently. "Oh, Ding? His name is Fielding. John Fielding Harrison, the fifth. He's been called Ding since I can remember. Quite a lad, too, though his appearance is misleading."

"I liked him. At least I'm sure I would—"

"You would. Ding is unusual. He has the courage of his convictions which is more than I can say for some of the rest of us."

He spoke abruptly and with sincerity, even a touch of bitterness.

"Why?" she asked hesitantly. "What do you mean?"

"He decided he didn't care a darn about finishing college or being submerged in the family business, so he left school after his first year and got himself a job."

"Was that unusual?" she asked. "Except, maybe, finding a job—"

"It made history." Don's short laugh was a trifle grim.

"The earth rocked and the windows rattled and the heavens opened to let thunderbolts through. All in a restrained and well-bred way, you understand."

"I don't understand."

"No, I don't suppose you do. Ding's family controls one of the last of the privately owned banks in the country. He was expected to carry on the tradition. But he was interested in advertising so he cut loose and got himself a job. That was five or six years ago. He's with the Owens Company and is doing all right. He's the youngest executive in the business. He gets ahead by sheer ability, too. He hasn't a relative connected in any way with the firm and he won't use his family connections except when it is legitimate."

"His family didn't like it?"

"To put it mildly. They still consider him a sort of black sheep. When people speak of his work, his mother tells them it has something to do with art. The Bohemian angle seems easier to understand than that banking could bore a Harrison. They've dug up an ancestor who painted very bad landscapes to explain Ding's eccentricities. Ding, himself, doesn't explain. He decided what he wanted and stuck by his guns. That takes courage."

She thought, surprisingly, of Joe. Joe had that kind of courage. He had refused athletic scholarships and turned down college to work for Dad. She'd thought it was stupid, that he wasn't looking ahead. But perhaps he was. Joe had made a decision and was sticking by his guns. He was doing all right, too. Dad hadn't actually consented to new greenhouses for growing roses. He probably would, though. Joe's arguments were convincing. He'd gone into details thoroughly, talking to rose growers, estimating the market, drawing up specifications, even investigating possible sources of soil and fertilizer—

Strange that she should think of Joe while she walked along the boardwalk with Don. Joe's brown head, with the stubborn waves that wouldn't lie flat, bent over a drawing-board in the workroom behind the shop, vanished from her mind. The remembered sound of his voice, confident but deferential, explaining white lines on blue paper to Dad, blended, then merged into Don's voice, talking to her seriously without the light bantering tone with which she was familiar.

"—and Ding is going to marry Ann Kincaid because she's a fine girl and he loves her," Don was saying when her attention returned to him. "And for no other reason on earth. There won't be any family arrangements made for Mr. and Mrs. John Fielding Harrison, the fifth."

"You sound fierce, Don."

He laughed as though he was suddenly conscious of the warmth in his voice and ashamed of displaying emotion.

"I'm envious, I guess," he admitted. "Ding usually has that effect upon me."

"But you—" She hesitated, then continued. "Don't you want to finish your law course? Is it a—family arrangement?"

"I'll tell you a secret, Kathie." He bent toward her as she looked up at him. She had never seen his face so grave before or unhappiness in his eyes. "I'd chuck it in a minute if my father had lived, if my mother wasn't alone."

Pity, a bewildering emotion to feel for Don, stirred in her heart. Some reflection of it must have appeared in her face for his expression altered. He smiled and said in a lighter tone, "Don't believe a word of it. I'm just beefing. Fun for me but not for you. Forget it."

But she didn't forget what he had said or the expression which had aroused her sympathy. Don did not forget it, either.

"I know what you're thinking," he said, much later. As, dinner finished, they lingered over coffee in the grill-room of a boardwalk hotel.

"Do you?" She set her cup in the saucer and sat looking at him across the table.

"You're thinking that I'm lazy, and beefing because I'm faced with examinations."

"Is that the reason?" she asked, not bothering to deny the accusation.

"Partly," he admitted. "But not entirely. I can't get steamed up about this work I'm doing because it won't take me anywhere I want to go."

"Where will it take you?"

"Into an office with my name in gold letters on the door. Not my name, either, my grandfather's, which is the same. I'll be kept there like a bottle of port until I'm well aged and covered with cobwebs. Then, if it seems advisable, they'll uncork me and serve me in small quantities to the customers, providing, of course, that I'm suitably mellow and have acquired a conventional bouquet."

She felt her eyes widen with astonishment. "You mean you'll have nothing to do?" she asked.

"Oh, they'll let me empty wastebaskets and sharpen pencils and dig up dusty facts." Don smiled at her amazement but it was an ironical smile in keeping with the wry humor in his voice. "After five years or so I may be allowed to accompany one of my elders into court, to carry his brief case and umbrella and give the youngster experience. After ten years I may even be permitted to lift my voice in defense of some minor corporation, if there are any left and my voice meets all requirements. I'll be expected to keep office hours, though. That's good discipline and looks well for the firm. We wouldn't want it to be noised about that the younger generation doesn't take tradition seriously."

"You're joking—"

"Joking! I'm not even exaggerating. Or, at least, not much. Listen, Kathie, I have two great-uncles in the firm, two uncles, mere striplings of fifty or so, and half a dozen male cousins hardly hatched from the shell. They don't need me. There's so much to see, so many things I'd like to do— Well," he finished with a short diffident laugh, "the prospect doesn't entice me. I can't stir up enough enthusiasm to give a hoot about those exams."

He was shattering an illusion. The glimpse of himself that he gave her, the restlessness and discontent beneath his smooth and charming manner, was disconcerting. She found it difficult to reconcile this new point of view with her ideas of the way of life into which Don had been born. She'd thought of it as free, though with an ordered elegance. She'd supposed that inherited traditions were keys which unlocked doors rather than locked them. She'd thought only families without them, like her family, had prejudices and limitations—

"It's tough going, isn't it?" Don's face was smooth again but the mocking humor with which he spoke peaked his brows and slanted his smile. "I imagine almost anybody would find it difficult to feel sorry for me. Kind as you are, Kathie, you can't quite manage it, can you? I know. Think of the Okies. Think of the sharecroppers. Think of the lads who are sitting on benches in Central Park. I read the newspapers, too. Don't look so solemn, darling. My father called it growing pains, at an earlier age, when I wanted to ship on a cattle boat or go west as a ranch hand. I don't know what you'd call it now, for certainly I have my growth. Just beefing, I guess." He pushed back his chair and rose. "I shall try to bear my lot with fortitude. And the first step in that direction is to take you home and have a last session with the lawbooks before morning."

He helped her into her coat, making her feel cherished. When they went out on the boardwalk he held her, companionably, close to his side.

"It was seeing Ding and Ann," he said in continued apology. "And being with you. That nonsense about making a tour of the oceans gave me ideas. You shouldn't give me ideas, Kathleen. They make me restless."

He had not mentioned Joan Thayer. Walking with him toward the parking lot where he had left the car, she wondered if the omission was significant, if Joan Thayer with her bronze-colored lashes and butterfly brows was included in the family arrangement. He spoke and the thought drifted out of her mind. "It's been fun, hasn't it?" he asked.

"Ummm!" she replied.

"A little more enthusiasm, please."

She laughed. "It's been lovely, Don."

"That's better. I didn't spoil it by beefing?"

"Oh, no! We're friends, aren't we? Beef away if beefing helps."

"I'll remember that. I'm likely to impose on you, though. You listen sympathetically. You don't appear to think I've taken leave of my senses if I have growing pains out loud. Tell me when I bore you. I'm easy to squelch."

She didn't tell him that, far from being bored, she appreciated his confidences. The things he had told her interested her and, surprisingly, aroused her indignation. And indignation, she discovered, was close kin to a more tender emotion. Until today she'd thought of him as a young lord of all creation who did as he pleased and took what he wanted from life. She'd tried to learn his ways quickly, so as not to make humiliating mistakes. It was disconcerting to find that he was restless and discontented, that he admired his friend for qualities he felt himself to lack. She sensed, though he had not

actually expressed the desire, that he wished he had the courage to break away from family arrangements and make his own plans.

But if his confidences destroyed a little of the glamor with which, in her thoughts, she had glorified Don, they gave her a warmer and more intimate feeling for him. She did not realize that protective instincts had been aroused with indignation. She did understand, walking down the ramp into comparative darkness from the glitter of the boardwalk, aware of the tightened pressure of his hand on her arm, no longer oppressed by silence, that Don, as a person, was more important to her than the way of life he represented.

That, too, was disconcerting. She liked what it did to her heart but was dismayed by the thoughts which, unwanted, but stoutly resisting dismissal, marched solemnly through her mind.

Chapter Ten

A LET-DOWN FEELING

THE SHOP WAS GAY with poinsettias and holly wreaths when Don stopped in to say good-by before he left for the Christmas holidays. Kathleen was arranging a table decoration for the wife of the college president. Mrs. Allison was particular and it was good for business to try to please her. Kathleen was getting a nice effect with ivy and snowberries and tall red candles. She was absorbed in her task and glanced up absently in reply to Bud's summons.

"A fellow is asking for you, Kath," he said, holding the swinging door half-open.

"I'm busy. Can't you take care of it?" Still absorbed in her work, she added a spray of fine-needed pine with cones no larger than a child's first thimble. Yes, that was nice. And a few sprigs of holly, maybe—

"He said you. Anyway, I've got that Kirby dame on my hands." Bud's round face, with fresh high color and blue eyes set in sooty lashes, looked aggrieved. He thrust his sturdy body further into the workroom and lowered his voice to what he evidently considered a discreet whisper. "What'll I do? She pinches and pokes and won't make up her mind. I'll be late for the school entertainment. The fellow said you'd know and his name is Alexander."

Kathleen dropped holly sprigs on the table. She had forgotten that college closed today. Actually, absorbed in pleasing Mrs. Allison, she hadn't remembered, for an hour, that Don was leaving town for a two weeks' vacation. The dreary feeling she'd had this morning when she woke settled down on her spirits again. But two

weeks wasn't forever. And he hadn't left town without stopping in to see her. She'd wondered, yesterday, last night, this morning, if he would—

"All right." She slipped down from the stool. "Tell him I'm coming, Bud."

Don stood before the display case, his hat in his hand, pretending, as usual, to be interested in the flowers. Seeing him there, her heart skipped a beat and she drew a steadying breath. The shop was in a bustle of activity. Bud, his expression tragic, was being patient with a sharp-featured woman in a sealskin coat. A committee from the Altar Guild of the Episcopal church was having an interview with Dad. Matt, in his pleasant way, was explaining to a little girl that African violets didn't really grow in Africa while her nurse counted pennies into her hand. Thelma's grandfather, old Mr. Schultz, fumbled among the vases and bowls on the table, getting everything disarranged.

"Good morning," she said, coming up to Don.

"Good morning, Miss Miller," he said with twinkling gravity. Then, in a lower voice, "Hello, Kathleen."

"Can I do anything for you?" she asked, having trouble with her voice.

"You can think of me at least once every day. What do you call that plant with the pink flowers?"

"It's a cyclamen."

"Wrap it up if you please."

"For Willie May Washington?"

"For me. To remind me of you. The flowers have cute profiles and the pink is the shade of your pinafore. I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you." She pushed back the glass and removed the plant in its frilled petticoat of crepe paper. "Will you take it with you?"

"Everywhere I go for the next two weeks."

"Idiot!"

"I passed those examinations. No, you needn't look smug or take any credit. Thinking of you nearly flunked me. I have a Christmas present for you. Here."

He dropped a small package into the pocket of her smock.

"Thank you, Don."

She went into the workroom to wrap the plant. The pert blossoms and the waxed paper blurred, as she tied the string, into a wash of pink and green. The package he'd dropped into her pocket was square and thin and tied with a silk and tinsel cord. She kept feeling to be sure it was there. He was waiting in the shop beyond the swinging door. She stopped at the mirror to powder her nose.

"Merry Christmas, Don."

"Merry Christmas, Kathleen." He took the plant in the crook of his arm. She didn't suppose he'd ever carried a parcel before. He held it awkwardly but with cherishing care. "I'll be seeing you."

Old Mr. Schultz shuffled toward them, spoiling their last moment together.

"How much for this blue lady, Kat'leen?" he asked. "Mamma likes such pretty things. I could maybe get it for her for a present."

Don looked impatient, then resigned and faintly amused. He smiled at her over the old man's head.

"Merry Christmas, again," he said and turned and went out of the shop. She waited, listening, tense and still. Through Grandfather Schultz's accent she heard the starting sound of Don's car, the smooth purr, distinct at first, then fainter, and finally lost. Don had gone.

She couldn't wait to open the package. She turned old Mr. Schultz over to Matt and went back into the workroom. The cord was knotted securely and, just at first, she couldn't see very well. Then the bow loosened and the cord fell away. The silver paper was patterned with

stars. She smoothed it and laid it aside. The box was glossy and the name of the jeweler was engraved in crisp letters. She removed the lid.

Absurd to feel disappointed. It was a beautiful compact. Sterling silver, too, striped with blue enamel and lined with gold. The round mirror was clear as crystal and gave her back her reflection in miniature so that she saw all of her face at once. The novelty of the small clear reflection pleased her but a sense of disappointment remained. A compact was an impersonal gift. She had a dozen of them, though none so lovely, so obviously expensive as this one. There was nothing to give it a personal value, no engraving, not even her initials.

She sat, turning Don's gift between her hands. Well, she told herself sensibly, if she would invent settings and situations, if she would arrange other people's thoughts and acts to dovetail neatly with her own, she might expect to be disappointed. She did that with Don. She imagined replies he might make to her comments, reactions, responses, that would conform to the relationship she had planned for them, before she had known him, really, last summer, when, after their first meeting she had begun to weave the threads of a dream. The disappointment she felt, that she had felt on other occasions, wasn't fair to Don. It was like expecting him to be "letter perfect," as Miss Wilson, the dramatics teacher at high school, used to say, in a play he hadn't read.

Yes, it was absurd. Common sense cleared her vision and rearranged her thoughts. She loved the blue and silver compact. But, just the same, she wished he'd given her something which would have assured her that he shared her memories, something silly, but with a personal meaning, a Victrola record of one of the waltzes the orchestra played at the Pheasant Inn, a copy of *Andersen's Fairy Tales*, one of the figures made of beeswax that they'd seen in the window of the boardwalk

shop at Atlantic City—

He'd be hurt if he knew his gift hadn't pleased her. She thought of him going off with that plant in the crook of his arm and amused tenderness eased the ache of disappointment. He'd create quite a sensation if he took it everywhere with him as he had promised. She imagined him entering a ballroom—she supposed ballrooms still existed—elegant in a white tie and tails with a pot of pink cyclamen in his arms. Or whizzing down a ski run or calling on elderly relatives, those great-uncles he'd mentioned. Probably Miss Joan Thayer would refuse to keep her engagements with him. Well, that was all right, too. That would suit her fine.

"The flowers have cute profiles and the pink is the shade of those pinafores you wear." Funny— No, "amusing." Very nice. She dropped the compact into her pocket and turned on the radio. Presently thoughts of Don no longer distracted her mind. They were there, deep under surface preoccupations, and the sadness of separation lay like a shadow across her spirits. But the sprigs of holly had to be added with care so as not to spoil the effect. She worked interestedly over the table decoration for the college president's wife and hummed, more cheerfully than she knew, with the radio choir which sang:

*Hark the herald angels sing
Glory to the new born king.*

Chapter Eleven

RIGHT GIFT, WRONG MAN

SHE HADN'T EXPECTED TO ENJOY Christmas this year. Always before she had looked forward to the holiday season with expectancy and excitement. She loved everything about Christmas, the carols which even endless radio repetition could not spoil, the crisp spicy fragrance of evergreens, the little cakes Mother made for Dad sprinkled with caraway seeds and iced with pink sugar, the out-of-door displays which blossomed into a soft radiance of colored lights on lawns and house fronts, candles, bells, holly wreaths, packages wrapped in gay paper and tied with tinsel ribbon.

Usually she began to be excited when the first Christmas decorations appeared in shop windows downtown and Dad and the boys brought the poinsettias from the greenhouses to the shop. From that point on, through shopping and plans, through secret consultations with each member of the family, through the days devoted to baking when the house smelled heavenly but was inches thick in dust, through getting out the boxes of ornaments for the tree and deciding which were fit to use and which must be discarded, excitement increased, reaching a climax on Christmas morning when the family opened presents. The sun porch and the living-room were a swirling sea of paper and ribbon; the babble of voices, the tooting of horns, the busy swish and hum of electric trains, the racket the kids made, if you yourself stopped to listen, sounded like an American Legion carnival on Saturday night.

She hadn't felt the usual enthusiasm this year. Preoccupied with thoughts and conjectures centering about

Don, spending her money for clothes to please him, evading family plans lest they interfere with a chance to be with him, she hadn't paid much attention to Christmas. When she thought of the holidays it was with a sinking of spirits rather than with mounting excitement. Don would be at home with his friends and relatives, keeping engagements with Joan Thayer, being gay without her in a world of which she knew nothing except what she read in the papers. The loneliness she anticipated was hard enough to face, the dreary succession of days when there would be no possibility of Don calling her or stopping in at the shop or making dates to meet her in the movies.

But there was a possibility which, in anticipation, was even more depressing. Ten days in his own environment might alter Don's interest in her. He might be different when he returned, no longer amused by inventing excuses and throwing smoke screens. If his friends, whom she had met in Atlantic City, had carried news of her back home, ultimatums might be issued. What would Don do then? She hadn't the least idea. He was fond of her. There were times when she thought he loved her a little. But, "They marry their own kind," Dad had said. She would like to think that Don had the courage to break away from tradition for her. She hadn't, however, much confidence in that possibility. Since the evening he'd talked to her of his family, his mother, the great-uncles he'd mentioned, his aunts and cousins, had seemed real and alarming, elegant specters which haunted her dreams.

So she hadn't thought of Christmas with pleasant anticipations. When Don had gone, however, she found herself being drawn into the excitement which quickened the rhythm of life at home and at the shop. She felt a first spontaneous thrill when, going home for lunch the day Don left, she saw the tree rising erectly, dark

green and beautifully shaped, from its burlap-covered ball of earth, standing on the front porch. Dad had a live tree delivered each year because, when she was a child, the poor skeletons of cut trees thrown out into back yards had distressed her. There was a hedge of them, now, between the house and the greenhouses. They spread their branches proudly, condescending to fruit trees and maples and the horse chestnut that, in summer, shaded the kitchen porch, remembering that they had once been decked with tinsel and had shone with colored lights.

She had expected to miss Don terribly. She discovered that she did not think of him for hours at a time. She was busy at the shop and, at home, excitement raged like a fire through a forest.

"Hilda wants to bring a friend home with her," Mother announced with as much pleasure as though she wasn't already planning Christmas dinner for sixteen. "She's an orphan. Isn't that nice?"

"It's lovely that she's an orphan," Kathleen replied, thinking that Hilda must be more sentimental about home than she admitted if she had asked permission to bring a friend.

"Oh, go on with you!" Mother bridled, then laughed. "You know what I mean, though my tongue doesn't make sense. Bud can sleep at Matt and Anna May's. Will you clear out his closet, Kathleen? You know how fussy Hilda is. Miss Jennings and I won't have time tomorrow."

"Miss Jennings" worked by the day. She was small and brisk and middle-aged and as bright-eyed as a sparrow. A Mr. Jennings figured in the continuous stream of confidences and anecdotes which accompanied "Miss Jennings's" motions like a theme song, so Kathleen supposed the "Miss" was merely a sort of figure of speech. She was good help in emergencies and would have ac-

accomplished more than she did except that Mother was always calling her away from some task to show her the doll she'd bought for Dotty or the silk quilt she and Dad were giving Matt and Anna May or having cups of tea with her in the kitchen. But "Miss Jennings" knew what all the gadgets that came with the vacuum cleaner were for and, beneath surface confusion, the house took on an unaccustomed sparkle and shine.

She had expected to keep herself informed of Don's activities through the society page of the paper. She simply hadn't time. Cliff had talked himself back into a job with the electric company and brought home illuminated wreaths for the windows. Kathleen and Dad held out for holly but Mother was enraptured with Cliff's contribution and Kathleen was called to advise and assist with the hanging of each. She went with Bud to buy presents for the family and with Cliff to the Betty Lou Shoppe to select a gift for Rose. She thought the flannel robe with some warmth and wear to it would have been a good deal more appropriate than the brocaded rayon hostess gown which Cliff selected. Rose would prefer peach-colored rayon, though, and she was touched by Cliff's desire to give Rose "something pretty."

Whenever she thought of Don, someone or something interfered. She would glance at a watch or a clock and wonder what he was doing at that particular moment. Before imagination could form a picture the thought would be lost in some immediate consideration or demand. She couldn't concentrate on thoughts of Don when she was half-distracted trying to wait on three customers at the same time or when Mother asked for advice which she didn't intend to follow, or the children, in the interval between supper and going back to the shop, demanded a new installment of the continued story she invented to amuse them while she helped Rose to bathe them and get them to bed. Junior, still "the baby,"

bounced and splashed in unquestioning delight but Dotty was skeptical about Santa Claus.

"He'd get burned if he came down the chimney."

Dotty watched Kathie's expression warily.

"He wears asbestos underclothes."

"What's that?"

"A material which doesn't burn."

"You're just saying that."

"Well, that's what your granddaddy told *me* when I asked that question."

Granddaddy's word inspired confidence and Dotty was anxious to be convinced.

"Then those kids at school tell whoppers. Go on, Kathie. What happened after the toys came to life and Santa Claus couldn't find the wooden soldiers because they'd marched off to fight a war?"

Snow began to fall at twilight on Christmas Eve. That added to the excitement. Last minute customers came into the shop with melting flakes on furs and overcoat collars. She hadn't time to go home for supper. Joe brought sandwiches in from the drugstore, and coffee in paper containers. They munched and sipped in the workroom between demands from the shop. She was glad Joe had offered to work for Matt. His high spirits turned drudgery into fun and made jokes of irritations. Joe was nice, she thought, dividing the last sandwich with him, calling him to take a plant from the window for her, laughing at his witty replies to her comments. He appeared to bear no resentment for the dates she had broken or refused during the past few weeks. In the rush and excitement of Christmas Eve trifles seemed amusing. When they bumped into each other, dashing in opposite directions through the swinging door, they laughed. When Mrs. Clarkson Kirby, notoriously stingy, came in to pick over what was left of the stock, they groaned in unison and looked at each other, their eyes

brimming with laughter. Joe picked up the carol she kept humming.

"Hark the herald angels sing
I can't sell the dame a thing,"

he complained in a rich but subdued baritone, rushing in and out of the workroom where Kathleen fitted paper frills on small pots of ivy for Miss Marshall's Sunday school class.

The jingles Joe started developed into a contest. The herald angels cried, shouted, chanted, quipped. They argued over which was the quicker at rhyming. Joe admitted her superior vocabulary but insisted that his efforts had more dash. They insulted each other and the final straggle of customers in hilarious verse and were still at it when Dad told them to go along home. Kathleen hurried into her wraps while Joe helped Dad and Bud to close the shop. She glanced up from a struggle with her galoshes as Joe came into the workroom.

"Hark the herald angels pant

Joe please do, 'cause Kathie can't,"
she sang, laughing and looking helpless.

Joe groaned in pretended dismay. "This has gone far enough," he said with a scowl which failed to suppress the twinkle in his eyes. "Baby talk! What's the matter?"

"The zipper is caught," she said meekly.

He knelt to investigate. "Why are women trusted with zippers?" he grumbled cheerfully. "They're the devil's own invention. There!"

He rose, took her hands, pulled her up from the chair.

"Hello, Kathiel" he said.

She glanced up in surprise.

"I'm glad to see you again," he explained. "I haven't for weeks."

"Of course you have. Every day." She tried to laugh it off but she knew what he meant.

"Not you." His eyes, gray as smoke but with points of

light like tiny flames, held her lifted glance. "I've had a nodding acquaintance with an uppity young lady who has been tripping around looking elegant and breaking dates with me."

"Please not uppity, Joe."

"That's my word and I'll stick to it. Don't tell me it's none of my business. I've known you since you were seven years old. That gives me privileges."

"Oh, does it, now?" She tossed her head but Joe only smiled at her small gesture of defiance. She smiled, too, because she liked him and it was Christmas Eve and Joe was fun.

"That's all right. The dates, I mean." His smile widened, though his voice was unusually tender. "But 'hello,' just the same. I'm glad you're back for a visit. It's grand having you with us for Christmas. Here, put your mittens on. It's snowing, you know."

They went out into the street. The snow fell in thick soft flakes. She lifted her face to catch them, liking the cold light touch on her cheeks.

"Let's walk home, Joe. Bud can bring your car."

"Aren't you tired?"

She gave a gay whirl. "I love the snow."

"All right, then. But wait for me. Don't run away."

He went into the shop to speak to Bud. When he returned, she held her hand, in the thick red mitten, toward the light from the window.

"Look, Joe! The flakes are like feathers," she said.

"And so they are." He glanced up and she saw his face, strong-featured, humorous, ruddy, as vital as a bonfire, through a softening film of snowflakes. Something stirred in her heart, affection, regret, a warm feeling of liking for Joe. He glanced down at her and smiled. "And why shouldn't they?" he asked. "Mrs. McGinty is shaking down her featherbed."

"Mrs. McGinty!" She gave a clear pleased laugh. "I

haven't heard that for years."

"It's time you did." He drew her hand through his arm and began to sing. His voice rolled out with a rollicking lilt, sounding rich and warm in the muffling hush of the snow.

"Joel!" she protested, laughing. "Stop! People are looking!"

"Let them look." His high spirits were irrepressible. "We'll give them a treat. It's seldom enough they hear a fine song like 'Mrs. McGinty.'"

She had expected to feel forlorn on Christmas Eve. But it was fun to kick along, arm in arm, through the snow, singing with him, breathless from laughing and trying to keep in step with his long swinging stride. It was fun to stop in at Hartman's for hot chocolate with whipped cream and crullers and cinnamon buns. When college closed for vacation, the town young people took over the pastry shop and the restaurant. Some of the crowd was there and they welcomed her as though she had, actually, been away and returned home for Christmas.

It was fun to chatter and sing and call greetings, not caring who saw her, with no feeling of tension or strain. Joe bought knickknacks for the children, snowmen made of popcorn balls, gingerbread horses, bouquets of lollypops, candied apples on sticks. He bought a candy cane for her, the largest she'd ever seen. She swung it by its crooked handle as they left Hartman's and walked on through the deepening snow.

The campus was dark and deserted with only a solitary light here and there. The big houses along Fraternity Row looked equally desolate. But the lawns beyond, the smaller houses on the side street down which they turned toward home, were gay with decorations. The holiday spirit shone out at them through windows with shades rolled to the top, in snatches of music when a door

opened or closed, in glimpses of trees being trimmed and smiling people hurrying homeward with packages in their arms.

"All of this—" she said, expressing a half-formed thought. "The love and kindness and fun. It makes you feel—"

"—that it's good to be alive." Joe finished the thought for her. "It gives you a fine feeling, doesn't it? Living can be a grand adventure, if you've the heart and the spirit to see it through. Times like this are worth most of the fight. Just seeing colored lights through the snow and feeling a lump in your throat and loving the whole world."

That was what she had meant. She was touched because Joe understood. The comfortable feeling of liking for him burned with a warm and steady glow. Joe was observing. But how could he possibly know that she had a lump in her throat?

"You're Irish and sentimental," she said in an effort to shake off disturbing emotion.

"And so are you," he said gently but with emphasis. "You'd do well to remember that, Kathleen."

She wondered what Joe meant exactly, how much he knew of her friendship with Don. Conjectures filled her mind, separating them, and she walked on in silence until she felt Joe draw her closer to him, his hand on her arm.

"Come back," he said, half-laughing but with a serious note beneath the bantering tone. "You're with us for a visit. No running away on Christmas Eve."

She laughed in apology and twirled her candy cane and thoughts of Don slipped away as they came in sight of home.

Cliff's wreaths made a fine show in the windows. The house was bursting at the seams with excitement and happy confusion. Cliff, on a stepladder, was trimming

the tree which covered one end of the sun porch. Bud was setting up his electric trains for Junior. The platform Dad had made years ago filled the opposite end of the room. Rose was sewing like mad to finish a pink silk dress for Dotty's doll. Hilda's friend, a small shy girl named Jane, was helping Rose, making ribbon rosettes with painstaking care and a pretty flush in her cheeks. Hilda was arranging the family gifts in the living-room, distributing them in neat piles. Mother was everywhere at once, giving advice, making suggestions, bringing cookies in from the kitchen, warning the others not to wake the children and, a moment later, going off into gales of laughter herself.

Kathleen and Joe were pressed into service. Joe helped Cliff with the tree lights and Kathleen ran upstairs and down on last minute errands. Somebody turned on the radio and the electric trains began to hum and Joe sang along with the radio and Mother brought in wine punch for everybody and sandwiches and cakes.

"I think your family is lovely," Hilda's friend said shyly, coming to sit beside Kathleen on the swinging couch. "My parents are dead and I have no brothers and sisters. You don't know what it means to me to be here."

Hilda, joining them, exchanged a glance with Kathleen. Hilda had the grace to look ashamed, Kathleen thought, and she, too, felt guilty. She tried to imagine how she would feel if she were separated from the family, if she never spent Christmas Eve with them again. She closed her eyes and opened them, absurdly relieved to find herself there in the midst of the confusion and excitement, the affectionate squabbling and warm-hearted ban.

The confusion finally quieted. Bud left to sleep at Matt and Anna May's, and Hilda and her friend went with him to take the family gifts. Rose reminded Cliff

that Dotty would have them up before daylight and they'd better go to bed. Dad waited up to hear a special radio program at midnight and then, against her protests, led Mother off upstairs. Kathleen and Joe were left on the sun porch alone.

"I'm going, too," Joe said. He dropped down on the couch beside her. The tree lights, glinting through tinsel and ornaments, made a soft brilliance and the snow tapped with a whispering sound against the windows. "You must be tired."

"Only pleasantly tired." Kathleen gave a long sigh and settled into the cushions. "It's been fun but it's nice being quiet now." She yawned, then smiled in apology. "I think I'm getting sleepy."

"I *know* you are." Joe smiled in sympathy. "But I won't be here in the morning. Can you keep your eyes open long enough to look at my present now?"

She sat up and swung her feet to the floor. "I'll make the effort," she said.

"Thank you very kindly." Joe took a small box from his pocket and handed it to her. She removed the lid and a layer of cotton. Beneath, on a second layer of cotton, lay a bracelet, links of gold with small dangling charms. She held it up and gave an exclamation of delight.

"It's lovely, Joe! And this is a roller skate, isn't it?" She touched one of the charms with her finger. "And see! The wheels really turn!"

"You were skating the first time I saw you. The first I remember, at least. I must have seen you before then when I went out to the farm with Matt. You'd just moved into town and weren't accustomed to pavements and roller skates. You bumped into me head on and sent us both sprawling. I thought then what a pretty kid you were."

"Did you?" She laughed softly. "Think of your re-

membering all this time."

"It's not so long since you were a kid," he reminded her.

"Ages." She bent her head over the bracelet. "And these—they're dancing slippers. Because you took me to my first real dance. And the slippers *were* blue," she marveled, "and tied with bows!"

He was pleased because she remembered. She knew that though he repeated teasingly, "Think of your remembering all this time!"

"And the star—?"

"That's to wish on rainy evenings." He bent over the bracelet with her. His big fingers touched the small objects gently. "This is a shamrock, in case you've forgotten, to remind you that you're half Irish. And the hand mirror is for when you want to powder your nose." He smiled at her.

"It is a mirror! Seel It reflects! And this— Is it a—mermaid?"

"Why not? I never knew a girl so crazy about the ocean."

Her heart beat queerly. He couldn't know. It was a coincidence. But the small golden mermaid brought a sharp aching thought of Don. She wished Don had given her the bracelet, that he'd cared enough for her to mingle sentiment and humor in so charming a gift. Strange that Joe had, big Joe who worked for Dad and had known her since she was a kid. It disarranged the pattern of her thoughts. She associated odd charming things with Don. Don, instead of Joe, should have given her this—

"Don't you like it?" Joe asked, breaking a lengthening silence.

"Oh, yes."

"Then why are you crying?"

"I'm not." She rose from the couch, ashamed of the tears that blurred her vision. Joe followed her. His hands

on her shoulders, he turned her to face him.

"What is it, Kathie?" he asked.

"Nothing. I—" She looked up at him and smiled through tears. "Your gift— It's so funny and so sweet, Joe. I—"

His expression altered swiftly. She saw the tiny flames burn in his eyes. His arms went about her and he repeated her name, "Kathie! Kathleen!"

She scarcely knew that she had stirred in his arms but Joe was aware of the light restive motion. His arms lost the urgency of which she had been disturbingly aware. He held her away from him and looked down into her face. He was searching for something, she thought. His eyes were intent, then, for an instant, oddly hurt. As she watched, the small flames flickered and died. He smiled as though with difficulty, an apologetic smile, that widened slowly into his familiar grin. "I just wanted to kiss you for Christmas," he said. "I needn't have been so violent about it."

She tried to speak but tears choked her voice, the words failed to come.

"What is it?" he asked. "Can I help?"

She couldn't tell him. The emotion she felt was a bewildering, warm liking for Joe, an aching desire for some reassurance from Don that he cared for her as she knew, now, that Joe cared. Her delight in the charm bracelet, the disappointment she'd felt when she opened the box Don had dropped into the pocket of her smock, last summer's dreams, a pot of pink cyclamen, silly rhymes, and a candy cane. She couldn't stop crying.

"Cry if you want to, Kathie. Don't mind me."

His arms went around her again. But this time he held her gently, talking nonsense and stroking her hair. She didn't love Joe, except as a dear and familiar friend. She was in love with Don, she told herself. Why, then, should she feel disappointed because he held her gently

and comforted her with small jokes as though she were a child?

It was very confusing. It was something she didn't understand.

Chapter Twelve

DISMAYING PROPOSAL

DON DID NOT IGNORE HER when he returned to college. She had prepared herself for some change in his attitude toward her, imagining an alteration so drastic that when he called her by telephone the evening of his arrival she was both surprised and relieved. She hadn't realized until she heard his voice, cordial, tender, even a little excited, how great her fear had been that he mightn't have called. The relief she felt frightened her, letting her know how inadequate her defenses were, how terribly she would have been hurt if events had followed the course she had charted for them in her imagination.

She was shy with him, just at first. The vacation lay between them, separating them, a wide plain to be crossed before they might be together again. She felt that he, too, was conscious of the holiday separation.

"Did you have a nice Christmas?" he asked. They sat in the chimney corner in the dining-room of the small inn they had discovered, before vacation, on the shore road. The room had once, quite obviously, been a farmhouse kitchen. A log fire roared and snapped in an enormous fireplace where a pot hung on a crane. The firelight moved rosily over whitewashed walls, striking glints from copper and brass, waking the faded colors in hunting prints, turning the maltese cat stretched out on the hearth a lovely amethyst shade. The settee in the chimney nook permitted them to sit side-by-side and there were pots of geraniums in the deep sill of the window. Don called it "their corner." They came there for chicken and waffles or toasted muffins with bacon and scrambled eggs when the mood of the moment, his mood,

demanding a snug simplicity rather than the gilt and plush elegance of the Pheasant Inn.

Kathleen liked the chimney nook in the old stone farmhouse. She liked the way she felt with Don, there, as though she were an adult companion, rather than a child being given a treat. Usually they talked of themselves or Don commented upon objects in the room, or they joked with the waitress or fed the cat and hours passed swiftly, ticked away by the clock on the mantel which Don said was "an early Seth Thomas" and probably valuable in spite of the way it looked.

"A very nice Christmas," she said in reply to his question.

"Much snow?" he asked.

"Lots of snow. It started on Christmas Eve."

"Yes, it did at home."

"Oh, did it there, too?" The plain stretched between them with no landmarks that were mutually familiar. Seated beside him in the chimney nook, she wondered, with an increasing sense of panic, if the change she had imagined had taken place, if he was waiting for an opportunity to tell her—

"A crowd of us went skiing." He took out a pack of cigarettes. "In the Poconos."

"Did you?" He'd talked like this driving out from town, scarcely looking at her after the first greeting. She'd been mistaken when he called her, thinking she'd heard in his voice a warmth she'd wanted to hear. She scratched a design with her fingernail on the surface of the cloth. "Was it fun?"

"Pretty good."

A silence followed. Presently she glanced up at him. He was looking at her. They broke into laughter.

"Who started that chitchat?" he asked.

"You did." Her spirits lifted. The nook with the deep-set window became "their corner" again.

"I can't imagine why." He dropped the cigarettes and covered her hand with his. "Imagine wasting time on that when I want to tell you how glad I am to see you again. I'd forgotten how pretty you are. That put me off. I'm just now recovering from the shock."

It was easy to talk to him, then, to thank him for his gift, to tell him things that had happened during vacation. He spoke of his activities. He told her he had left the pink cyclamen in his mother's care and, though she didn't believe him entirely, the idea pleased her. Finding him there when she glanced up, seeing the firelight deepen the golden tone in his smooth pale brown skin, feeling her shoulder touch his if she moved against the high back of the settee, she felt alive again, and happy and excited. She couldn't believe that she had enjoyed Christmas. Already Christmas Eve, the holiday parties, seemed hazy and far away. The charm bracelet Joe had given her was a pretty trinket but, remembering, she wondered at the emotion it had aroused. Don had returned and was glad to see her. Nothing else mattered. Nothing else was important at all.

He *was* glad to see her. They lingered on in "their corner" until she reminded him that it was getting late and she'd have to go home. Driving back to town, he kept her close beside him, her cheek against his shoulder, her hand in his overcoat pocket under the thick soft robe. When they stopped at the corner where he usually left her, he held her there in the car, inventing reasons for delay, reluctant to let her go.

She *couldn't* have imagined it. She told herself that repeatedly as days accumulated into one week, two, and she did not hear from Don. He hadn't made a date with her but she had expected to see him soon. Each morning, when she woke, she thought hopefully that Don would call her that day or stop in at the shop. Hope supported

her through the morning, languished in the late afternoon, toward evening withered and died.

She was bewildered and unhappy. She devised excuses for him. He was making up work he had missed. He was preparing for mid-year examinations. He was being tutored so that he might receive his degree at Commencement in June. The excuses, though reasonable, were not very consoling. He might call her, at least, or stop in at the shop. He needn't have left her to wonder and worry without an explanation.

At some point during the plodding progress of each day she was tempted to call him. Pride argued against that procedure, stayed her hand as it reached for the telephone or picked up a pen to begin a note to him. She couldn't bring herself to make an overture or ask for an explanation. Stopping in the drugstore one afternoon she saw him standing at the counter and ducked out of the store before he turned. Occasionally she caught a glimpse of his car and her heart leaped, then sank, as it turned a corner or sped along College Avenue or pulled into a garage.

She tried to forget him. At times she nearly succeeded. With her old friends, at Thelma's or Ruthie's, romping at home with the kids, playing games with Mother and Dad, the fret of wonder and worry would subside and she would feel gay and relieved. She went out with Joe, remembering the fun they'd had on Christmas Eve and during the holiday season. She would start off gaily enough, wearing his charm bracelet, hoping that during the entire evening she wouldn't think once of Don.

She always did. Seated beside Joe in the movies, her mind slipped back into a detailed review of the last evening she'd spent with Don. Ignoring the figures moving across the screen, she would try to recall his gestures, the exact words he had used, her mind so completely preoccupied that if Joe spoke to her she started

and, feeling guilty, was obliged to ask him to repeat what he had said. Or, dancing with Joe to the radio at Thelma's or the juke box at the Chocolate Shop, a sudden thought of Don's more slight and graceful build, his smoother movements, the superior feel of his English tweeds beneath her hand, the lilt would go out of her step and her animation would die away as though a switch had been turned off.

Joe knew that something was wrong.

"What is it, Kathie?" he asked as they sat one evening in a booth at Hartman's, having a soda after the movies.

She glanced up at him and then away. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"I didn't intend to ask questions," Joe said. "But the way you act—"

"Uppity?"

"No," he said, surprising her. "I don't mind your being uppity except when you break dates with me. You're as sassy as a blue jay, then, with a dance tune in your feet and toss to your head that's fine to see. But lately—"

"Well—?" she asked as he paused.

"You act like somebody bewitched," Joe complained. "You don't hear what I say to you. You keep listening and watching for something, heaven knows what. When I dance with you, first there's Kathleen and then a ghost in my arms."

"That must be interesting."

"It's too uncomfortable," Joe said in his forthright way. "I worry about you. I don't know whether it's safe to leave you and go away."

He was going to work for a firm of rose-growers to learn the business. He expected to be away for several months. During the summer Dad would have new green-houses built and Joe would take charge in the fall. She had heard the plans discussed over and over but, until this moment, she hadn't actually realized that Joe was

leaving.

"It's nice of you to worry," she said with a light forced laugh. "But why shouldn't it be safe? What do you expect me to do?"

"That's what worries me. I don't know." Joe smiled but his eyes were grave. "A girl like you with her head in the clouds and star dust in her eyes—"

"Cobwebs, maybe." She was moved by his concern but wanted to make light of emotion. She didn't succeed. Joe in his gray suit, with his ruddy skin and the brown waves of his hair that wouldn't lie flat, with his jokes and his gentleness, his independence, his concern for her, was familiar and dear. "I'll be all right," she said, not flippantly but with a desire to reassure both him and herself.

His expression softened. He leaned toward her across the table.

"Don't be unhappy," he said. "Be uppity while I'm away. You're a grand girl, Kathleen. The back of your hand to anybody who tried to take the dance tune out of your feet."

She missed Joe when he had gone. Frequently a thought of him slipped through bewildered thoughts of Don, giving her spirits a lift. His letters amused her. But she couldn't keep her promise to him. She became increasingly unhappy as a third week passed and she did not hear from Don. The days dragged by on lagging feet. The weather was dreary. Life had lost its sparkle. She thought seriously of going to live with Hilda, of getting a job, of business school. But hope, never entirely abandoned, kept her at home. Today— Tomorrow— After the week-end—

And then he stopped in at the shop. The bell jingled late one afternoon. She pushed through the swinging door and he was there.

"Hello!" he said smiling. "Do you remember me?"

"Just barely." Her voice sounded shaken. She drew a steadying breath.

"The name is Alexander."

"Oh, yes!" She was proud of herself. "It's all coming back. You're the kind-hearted gentleman who sends red roses to his cook."

He laughed. His manner was casual, as always. His dark eyes rested upon her with a bright and admiring glance. "Kathie, it's grand to see you. I've been wanting to but I couldn't." He sat on the edge of the glass and wrought iron table and plunged into explanations. "I'm being tutored. I've got to skin through mid-years. The family reputation and honor is at stake. I've been handed the torch and it's burning my fingers. Besides, Ding and Ann are being married next month."

"Oh—" she said. "Your friends— We met them in Atlantic City."

"They promised me they'd elope," he rushed on. "I wish they had. Ann's family is giving them the works. I'm an usher and have to put in an appearance whenever I can. Between that and the grindstone—"

"I know." The faint touch of sarcasm pleased her. "You're on the verge of a nervous breakdown."

"Does it show?" he asked, twinkling. "That's fine. You're always a comfort, Kathleen. I've missed you and "our corner" at the farmhouse and Fred and the Pheasant and Strauss waltzes and the cat. I get a lonesome feeling whenever I ride past the trolley station and don't see you waiting for me there. Have you missed me at all?"

"Oh, now and then."

"Well, that's something. You know this is sheer self-indulgence stopping in here to see you. I promised myself I wouldn't, until after exams. I realized the last evening we spent together that I'd have to stay away from you if I expected to keep my mind on my work."

She wanted to believe him. But caution flagged her impulsive response to his charm, to the relief and reassurance which flooded into her heart. The quick rush of words seemed a little forced. She wondered if he meant to take himself out of her life by gradual and soothing degrees.

"I wanted you to know, Kathie. No. That's just an excuse. Let us be honest at any cost. I wanted to see you. I kept thinking of that pink pinafore, the way your lashes curl, the honey color of your hair. You didn't sound possible. I wondered if I was making you up and come dashing around to be sure."

His voice was very disarming. His bright dark glance was as moving as a caress. The red flags of caution dipped but waved again when he said, "Yes, you're true all right. And that's no help at all. Because I've got to stick at the grindstone, Kathie. We can't go dancing until after mid-years and this wedding. Will you understand and not forget me entirely? Will you think of me once in a while?"

But if he wanted to be with her— If he was, as she had hoped, even a little in love with her— Examinations and weddings! No use being taken in by a charming manner and a caressing glance. What was it Joe had said about star dust? She winked and lifted her chin.

"I couldn't, anyway," she said steadily.

"Why not?" He gave her a quick questioning glance.

"I'm doing a part in a play. The high school alumni gives one every year. It takes up a good deal of time."

He looked relieved and then a little amused. "Well, do a good job," he said. "I'll be there to see you and applaud." She went with him to the door. The wind howled and dashed sleet against the windows. He grimaced, smiling, and turned up the collar of his coat. "Remember the rainy night we first went to the Pheasant?"

asked

"I remember." The red flags dipped again.

"I wish we might tonight." She thought that he was sincere. He took her hand and held it. "Spring is coming," he said, "and I'll have a breathing space. May I call you here at the shop occasionally? Just to hear your voice?"

"Yes, Don." She disengaged her hand. He smiled at her, pulled on his hat, strode across the pavement to his car parked at the curbing. The sound of the motor echoed through her mind long after she no longer heard it.

She hadn't intended to accept the part in the play but she called Miss Wilson that evening and said she would. Later, learning her lines, attending rehearsals, she was glad that she had. She had liked dramatics in school and had a small flair for acting. The play was bright and amusing and she had a good part. It was interesting to plan her wardrobe. The clothes she had bought to please Don would look well on the stage.

Dad gave her the money to buy an evening dress for the third act. She went to town in search of the one she remembered, pink tulle sprinkled with silver stars. There was no dress like it to be had but she selected a substitute. She was delighted with it when it came. The white tulle embroidered with delicate tracings of silver was becoming. The heart-shaped bodice gave her a quaint and fragile look. Dad, when she tried it on for the family, said she looked like a vanilla ice-cream soda. Cliff whistled in admiration. Mother and Rose made flattering comments. Hilda, home for Sunday, predicted that it probably wouldn't survive one evening of wear.

Rehearsals were sometimes pleasant and sometimes a bore, but they helped to pass the time. Don called her occasionally. She read in the paper of his activities in connection with the Harrison-Kincaid wedding. *Miss Ann Wharton Kincaid has selected, as bridesmaids, Miss*

Joan Wetherill Thayer, Miss Sally Jo Harrison, etc., or that among the groomsmen, which seemed to her a stuffy word, Mr. John Fielding Harrison has selected Mr. Donald Grant Alexander, III, Mr. Wharton Kincaid, etc. Or her attention was arrested by a paragraph in Polly Post's chatty column:

Joan Thayer entertained at an informal supper and dancing party in the Orchid Room of the Belmont in honor of Ann Kincaid and "Ding" Harrison who will be married at the end of the month. The beauteous Joan was a vision in cafe-au-lait lace, with accents of emerald green, dancing with handsome Don Alexander, and a little bird tells me that wedding bells may ring in that direction when Don becomes a full-fledged solon after graduation from law school in June—

On evenings when such items appeared, rehearsals for an amateur play would seem a dreary way of passing time. Kathleen would meet with the others of the cast in Miss Wilson's classroom where, last year, she had written essays and read Milton's "L'Allegro." She would be inattentive, at first, her mind occupied with lines of type, her imagination engaged in picturing Don dancing with that pretty girl with the red-brown hair. Gradually, however, she would become interested in the action of the play. Before the rehearsal was over she would have forgotten, temporarily, what a little bird had chirped into Polly Post's ear.

In the excitement of the first performance of *No, My Dear*, she didn't think of Don's promise to see her and applaud. She was slipping into the evening dress between the second and third acts, when somebody brought a box to her in Miss Wilson's classroom, nearest the stage in the high school auditorium, which was being used as a dressing-room. Thelma, who was helping her

dress, opened the box. She gave an awed exclamation.

"Kathie!" she cried, attracting general attention. "Are these something or aren't they?"

"A white orchid!" Beatrice Howell breathed through her make-up of a comedy maid. "It looks like a bride's bouquet. Did your father send them?"

A white orchid, white lilacs, lilies of the valley, tied with silver ribbon. These hadn't come from Dad's shop. She opened the envelope enclosed.

Can you hear me applaud? Don had written. Even his name looked strange. She hadn't seen his handwriting before. *You're splendid and I have blisters on my hands. May I see you after the performance? I'll be the gent without the opera hat.*

She carried the flowers out on the stage with her and was aware of the gasp that went up from the audience. Beyond that and the thought that this was as close to a debut as she was ever likely to come, she was conscious of nothing. She floated dreamily through the last act, repeating lines automatically, moving breathlessly in a fragrance of lilacs and lilies of the valley. When the curtain was finally drawn she sped back to Miss Wilson's classroom and out of the clouds of white and silver tulle.

"Was it him?" Thelma asked, interestedly, saving the white dress from destruction. "Have you got a date with him? Herel Let me put the flowers back in the box. They're wonderful! I'll make Emil get me one like it for our wedding. Is he waiting for you?"

"And the family is herel" Kathleen's head emerged through the neckline of the dark wool dress with the lingerie collar.

"I'll tell them something," Thelma promised.

"Oh, will you?" Kathleen gave a last swipe at lingering traces of make-up. "Tell them I have a date with Bill Jordan. Tell them anything."

"I will. I'll take your things, too. Emil is somewhere

around. Wait, Kathiel! Your slip shows! Here's a—"

But Kathleen had gone, the box of flowers clasped in her arms. She fled down darkened steps into the gymnasium and let herself out a side door. When she saw Don waiting, at a little distance from the front entrance, she slowed down her flying progress to a composed and casual walk.

"Hello!" He stepped out of shadows. "Let me take that."

"Hello, Don!" Her voice gave her away, but she didn't care. Perhaps he would think that its shaken timbre was caused by the excitement of the play.

"Can we go somewhere?" he asked. "Have a sandwich and celebrate."

"I'd like to."

"Come on, then."

He took her arm and led her to his car parked down a side street. She floated, drifted, beside him. The night was clear and there was a hint of early spring in the chill crisp air.

"I told you I'd be here. Did you expect me?" He tucked her in under the robe.

"I didn't really." She settled back against the upholstery with an unconscious sigh of content. "The flowers are lovely, Don. Perfect with my dress. How did you know?"

"That newspaper picture. I called the village photographer. He said the dress was white."

"You took that trouble!" she marveled.

"Certainly. The result was worth the effort." He set the car into motion.

"Did you like the play?"

"Was there a play? I didn't see anyone but you. I got all choked up watching you, especially in that white dress."

"Silly!" she said, but her heart sang. The wheels of the

car sang on the hard surface of the road, moving out into open country beyond the limits of the town.

"Kathie," Don said, breaking an ecstatic silence, "will you wear that white dress to the spring formal with me?"

She couldn't believe she had heard correctly.

"The big spring dance?" she asked breathlessly.

"Yes, if you think you would enjoy it. I would like taking you."

"Oh, I would! But—"

He brought the car to a stop by the side of the road.

"Kathie," he said, "ask your parents. Let me see you at your home." His voice was urgent, a little rough. She hadn't heard just that tone in the lazily charming accents with which he usually spoke. "I'm fed-up with leaving you on street corners and picking you up here and there. Tell your mother and father."

"But, Don—" she said hesitantly. "Don, I don't know. They— We— It's different at home. I mean—"

"That doesn't matter," he said as she broke off in embarrassment. "I'm crazy about you, Kathie." His arms held her and he spoke with his lips very close to her ear. "All these weeks of wanting you, of trying to forget that I'd ever known you because of some damned-fool idea of honor or something—"

She drew a little away from him. "Honor?" she repeated.

His arms held her close again. "Oh, it's nothing important. I mean it needn't be. Just the notion that I had to do what was expected of me. Why should I? Why shouldn't I have what I want? Kathie, darling, I didn't realize that those flowers would look like a bride's bouquet. When I saw you in that white dress, I knew. Kathie, I love you. Nothing else matters, does it? Really, I mean."

She had wondered how she would feel if he ever told her that. She sat quite still for a moment, looking away

from him out into the night. She felt, more than anything, a strange sense of dismay. The bare branches of a cottonwood tree shone silver-white in the moonlight. She would never forget it as long as she lived. As long as she lived she would remember the rail fence, that pine in the distance, the one star, brighter than the others, which seemed to rest on its topmost branch.

"You're so fresh and so sweet, Kathie," Don's voice said softly close to her ear. "You make me feel alive. Funny our meeting the way we did. I think of it so often. Kathie, maybe destiny *did* have something to do with it after all."

"Maybe, Don—"

"Maybe our meeting and loving each other was written in the stars long, long, before we were born. You do love me, don't you?"

"Oh, yes—I".

"There's no use trying to buck the stars in their courses." He gave a light shaken laugh. "Kathie, you'll ask your mother and dad to let me take you to the dance, and come to see you at home."

"Yes— Yes, Don," she said.

"That's my girl. You *are* my girl. I invented you. I made you up out of a fairy tale and then I brought you to life."

"You did— You brought me to life, Don. I kept waiting for you, after that night last spring. All during the summer, I wondered if you would come back to college. No, not wondered— I *knew*, somehow. And when you came—"

"Yes, I know. From the first. Kathiel Darling!"

He kissed her, holding her close, and thought was lost in emotion. Then she relaxed quietly in his arms again. Her head dropped against her breast. She ran her hand caressingly over his hair.

She hadn't wondered how she would feel. She had

imagined the sense of wonder and breathless delight. But she hadn't anticipated the dismay with muted ecstasy, the feeling of pity, oddly enough for Don more than for herself, which ached in her heart with a bitter-sweet pain.

Chapter Thirteen

DAD KNOWS BEST

SHE KNEW, WHEN SHE OPENED the front door at home, that somebody was waiting up for her. Not merely because the bulb in the glass parrot burned and light came from the sun porch; Mother always left the downstairs illuminated when one of the family was out. There was something else to warn her, a sense of tension which she felt when she closed the door softly and tiptoed toward the stairs. Or perhaps it was her conscience. She and Don had sat in the parked car for hours. It was later than late, nearly dawn.

Her instinct had been correct. She heard a movement on the sun porch as she started upstairs and Dad called her name.

"Hello," she said and turned back. Carrying the square box of flowers she went to the door from the hall into the sunroom. Dad, while waiting for her, had evidently dozed off. He blinked sleepily from an armchair and smiled vaguely. Then, as consciousness returned, the vague smile vanished. His expression became stern.

"Do you know what time it is?" he asked.

"Not exactly. Late, I'm afraid. I'm sorry, Dad."

She didn't feel sorry. She doubted that her appearance suggested remorse. She was certain that what had happened to her must be only too apparent, in her eyes, on her lips which Don had kissed, in the warm color she felt flooding into her cheeks with the quickened beating of her heart. She felt that she must give off a radiance, like the bright haze surrounding the flame of a candle. She stood in the doorway, poised for flight, still dreamily preoccupied, not yet fully aware of the issue that must

be faced.

"Where have you been?" Dad was wide-awake, now. He hadn't undressed. He wore his Sunday suit that he had worn to the play. His tie was knotted under a stiff collar. His vest was buttoned. He hadn't relaxed even by as much as unlacing his shoes, lest, she thought in a dismaying flash of perception, he might fail to do his full duty as a parent.

"Didn't Thelma tell you?" she asked, hoping to postpone the issue. Conflict with Dad would dim the magic of the evening. She wanted to keep it intact, to think of it when she'd gone to bed, remembering the sweet silly things Don had said to her, reliving those hours in the car parked under a cottonwood tree. "I'm sorry you waited up," she went on. "It didn't occur to me you would worry." She smiled, blew a kiss, turned again toward the stairs. "Good night—"

"Come back here!" Dad's voice blew away her airy apologies like dandelion fluff in a rising wind. She turned back, obedient but resentful. Dad had never been stern with her. She remembered scenes with Rose, though. She remembered when Matt had tried to run away and join the Marines. Well, she might as well get it over. She drew a steadying breath.

Dad sat forward in his chair. "I asked you where you have been?"

She was spared the necessity of making an immediate reply.

"Is that Kathie? Has she come?" Mother called in a sleepy but carrying whisper down the stairs. She appeared a moment later, tying the sash of her robe and panting from exertion.

It was cheering to know that Mother had not considered the situation of sufficient gravity to sacrifice a night's sleep. Mother's face was flushed and her blue eyes were drowsy. The two short curly pigtails in which she braided

her hair for the night made her look young and humorous. Mother's presence, as usual, eased the tension a little.

"Now you see, Dad," she said. "Kathie's here. There was nothing to get up in the air about the way you did. She just changed her mind, that was all. You get to bed, Kathie. The play was wonderful and you did fine. That white dress was pretty. And the flowers. I said to Mrs. Schultz—"

Dad interrupted. "Do you know what time it is?" he asked.

Mother glanced around her as though in search of a clock. "Why no," she said, "but I'd just got off to sleep. I shouldn't have taken that coffee—"

Dad cut Mother off short again. "It's four o'clock," he said sternly, "and Kathleen has just come in."

The information startled Mother. She transferred her allegiance to Dad. Kathleen had hoped to escape, protected by Mother's brisk chatter. She saw, now, that that protection had been withdrawn.

"Heavenly stars!" Mother plumped herself down in the swinging couch which gave forth a creak and a groan. "Well, where have you been, young lady? That's what I want to know."

"I'm glad to see you're interested," Dad said grimly.

It was an issue, indeed, when Dad spoke sharply to Mother.

"Didn't Thelma tell you—" Kathleen ventured rather limply.

"Thelma told us what you told her to tell us," Dad said.

"But Bill Jordan was in Hartman's with that Howell girl," Mother put in. "We stopped there for ice cream after the play." Mother's eyes were no longer drowsy. They snapped with indignation. "Thelma kept on saying you'd told her you were going out after the play with

him but there he was with the Howell girl. I've bragged that I could trust my children to tell me the truth. And you shame me before the Hartmans and Schultzes—"

"Were you out with young Alexander, Kathleen?" Dad asked, coming straight to the point.

Astonishment made a reply difficult. "Yes, Dad," she said, after a moment.

"You've been meeting him, haven't you?" Dad went on. "Since some time last fall. I was told but I didn't believe it, though, before Christmas, he was in the shop a good deal."

"Young Alexander? Who's he?" Mother wanted to know.

"The Alexanders that have the farm next to the Kincaids'," Dad said. "In the Valley. The boy is in the law school."

Mother sat up straight. "You've been going around with college boys?" she asked incredulously. "You, Kathie? My little girl?"

"Oh, Mother!" Exasperation warmed Kathleen's voice. "No, I haven't been 'going around with' college boys. Don is a friend of mine. I like him and he likes me. We enjoy being together. What's wrong with that?"

"You know what's wrong with it, Kathie." Dad, she knew, made an effort to speak calmly. But an old resentment simmered under the surface calm of his manner and voice. His jaw showed a white ridge under his weathered skin and his hands, clutching the arms of the chair, were white at the knuckles. "You know what I think of town girls and college boys. You know—"

An old indignation in Kathleen's breast came to a full rolling boil. "I *do* know," she flared out, "and I think it's ridiculous. I think it's a stupid and ignorant attitude, an admission that you feel inferior to the people who are connected with the college. Well, I don't feel inferior!"

"Kathiel!" Mother moaned. "Don't talk to your father that way."

"But it's true," she cried with low vehemence. "I think—"

Dad broke in abruptly, angry and stern as she had never seen him before in all her life.

"Whatever you think," he said, scarcely raising his voice but effectively shouting her down, "this is my home and you'll do as I say as long as you stay here. I won't have a daughter of mine getting mixed up with scandal and talk—"

"Like that Leonard girl," Mother put in, "getting killed racketing around with those college boys last spring."

She had an impulse to tell them everything, her connection with the tragedy, how she had met Don, that he had brought her safely home that night. But confessing would not alter Dad's attitude, she thought, paying scant attention to Mother's spirited recital of gossip and scandals stretching back through the years. Dad would use that information against her, in defense of his attitude. He was right, perhaps, she admitted with confused reluctance. But she and Don. This was different. From the night they had met their attraction had gone deeper than a pickup and a flirtation. She would have to explain, somehow. She *must* make them see—

"You must promise me not to see young Alexander again," Dad said, breaking in through Mother's increasingly dramatic anecdotes. "I forbid it, Kathleen. Do you understand?"

"I can't promise you that, Dad," she said quietly.

"You mean that you intend to keep on sneaking out to meet him, lying to your mother and me, making yourself cheap, getting talked about?"

"If it's necessary," she said.

"Kathiel! Kathiel!" Mother rocked back and forth.

working herself up into a state. "I can't understand it! I should think you'd have more pride than to run after somebody who's willing to meet you on street corners. You know he can't have any respect for you."

"He does respect me!" She held herself proudly, her chin tilted, her shoulders in the trim dark coat gallantly squared.

"Why doesn't he come here, then?" Mother asked. "Why doesn't he want to meet your family? Why haven't you brought him home?"

"Because I didn't dare." The thought that she'd been ashamed to bring Don here occurred to her. She put it out of her mind. This was no time for weakening memories, for twinges of guilt or treacherous affection. "You've heard what Dad said," she went on, deliberately maintaining resentment at a sustaining heat. "How could I have brought him here? Dad would have insulted him, probably. How could I have brought him home?"

"Your father never insulted anybody in his own home," Mother said loyally. Then her voice altered. "Does he want to come here to see you?" she asked.

"Certainly he does." Kathleen held her head high. "He's hated sneaking and lying as much as I have. Don is a gentleman. He isn't accustomed to picking up girls on street corners. He considers it a reflection on me."

"And so it is." Mother glanced tentatively at Dad. To Kathleen, accustomed to Mother's mental processes, the glance revealed several cheering facts. Mother was on her side again, ready to champion her against Dad. Since there was no longer a question of affronted pride, Mother was prepared to accept Don with warm-hearted hospitality. While she glanced at Dad with cajolery in her merry blue eyes, Kathleen knew that Mother was planning the menu for a supper or Sunday dinner at which Don would be an honored guest. She was already planning what she would tell Mrs. Schultz and "Ma" Hart-

man and the ladies in her sewing club, boasting about Don in a deprecating way, proud that Kathleen should have attracted one of the Alexanders. But Mother was shrewd.

"No, I suppose it wouldn't do," she said to Kathleen. "The way your father feels, it wouldn't do to ask him here to supper, maybe, and let us get acquainted with him."

"I forbid it," Dad said, but his voice had lost a little of the steel.

"Yes, that's right." Mother assumed a downcast expression. "You must do as your father says, Kathie. Even if this young Alexander— What's his name?"

"Donald—Don—" Her voice softened. Weariness, tugging at her spirits, breathed into a sound like a sigh.

"No, I suppose it wouldn't do," Mother reflected craftily. "Not even if he thinks we're ignoramuses and don't know what's what. You must do as your dad says, Kathie. He knows what's best. I might have had boned turkey with mushroom sauce. I don't suppose any fancy cook the Alexanders ever had could make it taste like I can. It's the pinch of sage, I always say." Mother looked resigned.

A ripple passed over Dad's face. It was not quite a smile and gone almost before she was sure she had seen it. Mother, bless her! Rocking back and forth in a robe patterned with roses as big as her head. Those short curly pigtails. What a darling she was!

"I can't consent to it, Kathleen." Dad's voice was stern again. "It's against my principles. You must promise me not to see young Alexander again."

"I can't do that." She held weariness off a moment longer and steeled her heart against treacherous affection. "I will see Don, Dad, when and where I can. I—I'm sorry—" Her voice trembled. She fought against tears. "I—I *am* sorry. I guess that's all I can say." She caught

up the box of flowers, turned, ran blindly up the stairs.

In her own room she undressed quickly and slipped into bed without turning on a light. Dawn made gray squares of the windows. She removed the lid from the box on the stand beside the bed. A faint fragrance of lilacs breathed out into the room. She buried her face in the pillow, for fear of waking Dotty, and wept.

A hand touched her head, stroking her hair. "Kathie," Dad said.

She turned over in surprise. She had not heard his footsteps on the stairs. She had not heard the door open or close. She lay looking up at Dad, barely able to distinguish his features in the dim light of early dawn.

"Does it mean so much to you, Kathie?" Dad's voice was gentle. He sat on the side of the bed. His hands, work-roughened but tender, smoothed tumbled hair back from her brow.

"Yes—" she said almost inaudibly.

Dad was silent for a moment. Then, "I don't mean to be unkind," he said. "I'm thinking of what's best for you."

She roused. "But how do you know what's best? I don't mean to be impertinent. But, Dad, how do you *know*?"

"I don't," Dad said slowly. "No parent does. Maybe it's wrong to try. Even God lets people make mistakes. He lets them fall down and bump their heads and skin their knees and after a while they learn. Maybe God's way is right. It's hard when it's your own, though. You want to protect your children. You, especially, Kathie." Dad spoke almost shyly. He so seldom expressed his affection in words. "You're the special one, somehow."

She was moved. She caught his hand and held it against her cheek. "Then Don may come here to see me?" she asked.

He sighed before he replied. "Yes," he said, "if that's

the way you want it to be."

"I do and thank you." She gave a soft light laugh. "All this fuss about going to a college dance!"

"Is that—all it means, Kathie?"

She had to be honest with him as he was honest with her. "I don't know," she said. "I like him—"

"And what about Joe?"

She laughed again, this time a little uneasily. "It's funny—I like Joe, too."

Dad chuckled, surprising her. "If that's the way of it, I'll let you have your head. Not that I could prevent it, probably. You're proud and have plenty of spirit." He paused, then went on. "You remember one day when young Alexander came in the shop and I talked about those families that spend summers as neighbors to the Kincaids?"

"Yes—I remember."

"I wondered, then, if that young man had his eye on you. There was something about the pair of you— Well, you remember what I said about them. The young ones may get ideas but—they marry their own kind."

"Who's thinking of marriage?"

"Nobody, I hope." Dad was obviously embarrassed. "It's hard to say things like this. You'll know when you have a pretty daughter. Maybe I'm wrong about that, too. But I couldn't be easy in my mind without—"

She understood what he wanted to say. "Never mind, Dad." She gave his hand a squeeze. "You've done your duty. If I fall down and bump my head, it will be my own fault."

"Which won't make it easier for me." He stood erect, then bent over and tucked the covers around her as he had when she was a child. "You sleep late tomorrow. Don't bother coming down to the shop."

"I will in the afternoon. I'll be all right."

"It's meant a good deal to me having you there. Is it

all right? I shouldn't want there to be bad feelings between you and me."

"No bad feelings."

"You go off to sleep." Dad stooped and kissed her forehead. "I'll go down and get your mother to bed. She's probably turning everything upside down looking for her Aunt Ida's recipe for boned turkey with mushroom sauce. Good night, Kathleen."

"Good night, Dad. Thank you for coming up. No hard feelings—ever."

She turned on her side when Dad had closed the door, when she'd heard his cautious footsteps die away at the foot of the stairs. She'd meant to think it all over. But thoughts would not stay clear. Lines from the play merged into Don's voice, "I'm crazy about you, Kathie," into Dad's voice demanding, "Where have you been?" into his gentle "Good night." She tried to hold Don's face in her mind, his smooth pale tan skin, the color and texture of a pheasant's egg, the scar under his eye that showed when he smiled, the way his hair grew in a clean line curving back from his forehead. His face kept changing into Mother's face, into Thelma's, into white flowers that looked like a bride's bouquet.

She felt faithless to Don, not being able to remember clearly. As compensation, she picked a sprig of white lilac from the bouquet and held it in the palm of her hand against her cheek. The windows brightened with a pinkish light. She did not see it. Wearily, happily, she slipped over the borderland from waking dreams into sleep.

Chapter Fourteen

FAMILIES DO MATTER

SHE TRIED TO PREPARE DON for the family, choosing her words with care, speaking of them with affectionate amusement, conscious of anxiety beneath the glancing gaiety of her manner and voice.

"Mother is a darling," she said, introducing the subject of the family. She sat with Don in a booth at the Chocolate Shop, just off the campus, meeting him there for an hour between his afternoon classes. "She's a young sort of person. She loves bright colors and lights and company and good food. When she's excited her cheeks get as pink as peonies and she says things in a funny Irish way."

She regretted the words as soon as they had left her lips. They made Mother sound like a comedy character in a novel or a play. She'd wanted to give Don an idea of Mother's endearing qualities, her generosity, her high spirits, her warm-hearted affection. She certainly hadn't succeeded. She glanced at Don, wondering what he thought.

He smiled at her. "Do you look like her?" he asked.

"My eyes are like hers. Otherwise I don't look like her at all. My sister, Rose, does. She has brown curly hair like Mother's and high color and she's getting heavy. She and her husband and two children are living at home just now. They're moving into a house of their own, one of those in the new development, as soon as it is finished. Cliff, Rose's husband, is a jack-of-all-trades and doesn't stick at anything very long. He's nice, though, and Rose is crazy about him in spite of his tall tales and what he calls his 'itching foot.' He's done just about everything, played in an orchestra and with a

semi-professional ball team and—" She broke off. "They aren't listening, Don."

"How can I listen when I look at you?" His dark eyes were bright and soft and his smile was tender. "Have you any idea how lovely you are?"

She should have been satisfied. She shouldn't have wondered, uneasily, whether Don said charming things to her in an effort to change the subject. She imagined a meeting between Cliff and Don and her spirits sank. She saw Cliff as Don would see him, neatly and nattily dressed in a pin-striped suit, smelling of barber shop lotions, with his wisecracks and his too-familiar manner and the way he had of letting a cigarette droop from the corner of his mouth. Don wouldn't know how sweet Cliff was with Rose and the kids, how he sat up all night with Dotty when she had an earache, telling her stories—

Well, she couldn't help what Don thought of them—

But some compulsion forced her to speak of the family again and again.

"Dad was fine about night before last when I got in so late," she said some time later.

"Oh, your dad?" Don said absently, lighting a cigarette.

He was thinking of Dad as he'd seen him in the shop, with a sweater under his coat, bringing in flats of flower-pots from the truck, his shoulders stooped, his hands earth-stained, as likely as not. Don couldn't know that she thought of Dad seated on the side of her bed, smoothing tumbled hair back from her forehead.

"He was angry at first," she went on in a swift rush of words. "Then he understood. Dad is fine. He doesn't talk a great deal but he's kind and generous and—"

Don's eyebrows lifted into humorous peaks, interrupting the soft rush of words. "You're sure he won't level that shotgun at me?" he asked.

It was an old joke. They had mentioned it often. But

When as she laughed with him, she resented the question, resented that humorous quirk of his brows. She told herself that resentment was unfair. She, herself, had criticized the family often enough in her thoughts. Criticism was a part, at least, of the compulsion which urged her to explain them to Don.

She couldn't. The effort was useless. But she made a further attempt. "We're a rackety family," she said, walking back to the shop with Don through the pale sunshine of early spring.

"You aren't rackety," Don objected.

"Oh, but we are at home. There are so many of us, now that Rose and Cliff and the children are there. The house is full of furniture and people and roller skates and velocipedes. Cliff plays the traps and Bud a saxophone. Dad has a violin. Things are always all over the place because Mother is usually cooking grand meals and Rose has liberal ideas about dust and order. Miss Jennings comes in to shine us up on special occasions. When the telephone rings, everybody jumps to answer it and if you rang the doorbell, as likely as not, somebody would call down to you out of a window."

She wanted some expression of reassurance from him. She wanted him to tell her that what her family was or how they lived was of no importance. She wanted Don to see them as she saw them, with affectionate tolerance for their shortcomings and appreciation of their fine qualities. She waited hopefully, when she had stopped speaking.

But—

"I wish I hadn't made engagements at home for this week-end," Don said, making no comment upon her confidences. "I won't again. I hate leaving you." He held her arm and walked more slowly as they came in sight of the shop. "I'm crazy about you, Kathleen. Do you mind if I keep telling you? I shall whether you mind or

She should have been satisfied. Every dream she had dreamed had come true. Sometimes, in sheer incredulity, she broke off in the middle of a sentence or stopped short whatever she was doing, to marvel at what was happening to her. It was a delight to walk down College Avenue with Don quite openly, not caring who saw her. To stop in at the drugstore or the Chocolate Shop was a recurring pleasure. She liked having him introduce her to his friends. "Hi, Kim! Miss Miller, may I present Mr. Kimball?" "I want you to know Pete Thayer, Kathleen. We roomed together when we were freshmen." "This is Kathleen, Dusty. Miss Miller, Mr. Rhodes." Being pretty and young and feminine, she liked the deference they received, the glances that followed them when she was with Don.

She was a part of it, now, insofar as Don, himself, was a part of the college. His detached attitude toward campus activities had puzzled her when she'd first known him. She came, gradually, to understand. All of it was an old story to Don. He sometimes said he'd spent half of his life in the town, through college and law school. He was older than that element of the college which organized student activities. He was here to work for his degree. Except for the more spectacular dances and games, he did his playing at home. Her interest in the college amused him. When she asked questions, he made replies which she knew were more than half nonsense. She had tried to tell him, once, what the spire of the chapel meant to her. He had laughed at her fondly, as though indulging a child, and, after that, she'd been careful not to make naïve confidences.

She learned, through his casual comments, that organized activities did not interest him, that he considered most of his fellow students juvenile and rackety, if not actually ill-bred. He seemed to be well-liked but his

Don's friends were a small and select group who, in their different ways, had the same air of distinction which Don had and, apparently, the same attitude toward the college. The attitude wasn't snobbish, exactly. Don was friendly without condescension. He never gave himself airs. It was as though, she thought, groping for an explanation, his background made him instinctively discriminating.

She'd thought, during the years she'd lived in the town, that to be included in the activities of the college would satisfy her longings for a gracious and ordered life, for that intangible perfection for which she had no suitable word. Don, from his different environment, had an almost unconsciously superior attitude toward the college. Well, she sometimes told herself with humor in which there was much of dismay, if she'd wanted to pull herself by her bootstraps, she'd certainly gone at it in a large way.

Don's feeling for her was deeper than infatuation. She was confident of that. She should have been satisfied. But she delayed taking him home.

"For the love of heaven what *do* you want, Kathie?" Mother finally asked in exasperation after Kathleen had repeatedly vetoed her plans and suggestions. "You make a fuss fit to raise the roof about bringing the boy here and then nothing suits you."

"Don is at home for the week-end," she said, nerves frayed and irritability increasing. "I told you that."

"Well, middle of the week, then." Mother was not to be done out of an opportunity to entertain one of the Alexanders in a style to which he certainly was not accustomed. "I'll get Miss Jennings in to wait on the table—"

"Miss Jennings!" Kathleen made a gesture of dismay.

"Well, why not?" Mother's blue eyes snapped. "You're always going on about people hopping up from the table

during a meal. I thought you'd be pleased to have somebody take this in and out. Miss Jennings does real well. It don't bother me if she talks to us some. I like it. It's friendly."

"Please don't have her, Mother."

Mother's expression was bewildered. "I'm just wanting to please you," she said, helpless but indignant. "It don't matter to me. What *do* you want?"

She wanted a butler, though she had never seen one in the flesh in all her life, or a maid, like a movie waitress, in a frilled apron and cap. She wanted a serene and beautifully appointed dining-room. What was it Don called that table they'd seen at the farmhouse? Sheraton, she thought. Mahogany. Silver and candlelight. The dining-room at home looked especially dusty and cluttered. She couldn't, she simply could *not* bring Don here.

Mother, with her usual penetration, read her thoughts. She flushed and her eyes shot sparks of deep blue lightning and the curls on her neck spiraled with the indignant toss of her head.

"Well, I must say, Kathleen," she began. "A girl that's ashamed of her folks—"

Kathleen threw her arms around the plump and incensed shoulders. "I'm not!" she cried, protesting with greater fervor because Mother's accusation was true. "I'm not ashamed. I know everything will be lovely. But could you persuade Miss Jennings not to wear that pink dust cap when she serves?"

Mother's indignation melted into affection and revived interest. She planned a menu while Kathleen listened in helpless dismay. Worn down by Mother's insistence, ashamed of disloyal thoughts, she promised to invite Don for supper some time during the week.

She couldn't do it. She couldn't face one of Mother's party suppers. She simply could not bear the thought of Don seeing them at their worst with the table loaded

with dishes and Mother in her new wine-colored silk and everybody feeling stiff and trying to make polite conversation. She took the bull very firmly by the horns.

"Come in and meet the family," she said, when Don drove her home from the shop late the following Monday afternoon. "Have supper with us?"

"Shall I?" She thought he seemed a little reluctant. Her nerves, twanging like fiddle strings, nearly snapped.

"Unless you can't bear the thought," she said stiffly.

"Oh, Kathiel!" His voice sounded hurt and reproving. "I didn't mean that. I wondered whether your mother expects me. After all, just barging in—"

"She doesn't expect you." The glance she gave him was an apology. "It won't be a bother, though. Mother likes unexpected company. It gives her an opportunity to rise to an occasion."

She led him into the hall, noticing with relief that the house seemed unusually quiet. Don threw off his topcoat. She didn't look at him. Talking brightly, but with icy finger tips, she smoothed back her hair before the mirror. As they passed the living-room door, Bud glanced up from doing homework at the desk.

"Hello, Kath!" he said casually. "Do you know anything about geometry?"

"Nothing at all." Her voice sounded thin and forced. "Don probably does. This is the baby, Don. We call him Bud."

"Baby!" Bud, at sixteen already nearly six feet, grinned good-naturedly and threatened to shy a book at her. "Hello," he said to Don, in the manner of one man-about-town to another. "I've seen you around." He bent his dark head and sturdy shoulders over the desk.

The children were in the sun porch. Cliff, seated on the floor, was building some sort of a structure for them with Tinker Toy rods and wheels. He had his coat off and his hair was rumpled. Cliff was at his best with the

kids.

"Glad to know you," he said when Kathleen had introduced Don. "Sorry I can't get up. This is a tricky bit of engineering. If we move it's likely to crash."

"It's a Ferris wheel," Dotty offered. She glanced with sly interest from Kathleen to Don, and Kathleen held her breath. Dotty had certainly heard Don discussed. Dotty heard everything. What in heaven's name might she say?

But Dotty's attention was diverted. Junior gave the Ferris wheel an investigating touch.

"You stop that!" Dotty said, bristling with importance. "Daddy said not to touch!"

The little boy drew back a chubby hand and looked up at them with his slow, wide, lovely smile.

"Hello!" he said and laughed as though at some beautiful private joke.

Don laughed. "Hello, young fellow," he said and Kathleen felt the ice begin to melt.

It was a curious impulse, some notion of getting it all over as quickly as possible, which led her to take Don into the kitchen. She was glad, afterward, that she had. The kitchen, large, bright with colored linoleum and gingham curtains, though in a customary state of disorder, was the most pleasant room in the house. Mother was rolling out pie dough at the table. Rose sat on the kitchen stool paring apples.

"Mother, Rose, this is Don Alexander," Kathleen said.

"Well, for—" Mother, startled, began with forthright candor before Don could speak. "What's got into you, Kathie? Bringing him out here in the kitchen and all. I don't know what you'll think, Mr. Alexander." She wiped a floury hand on her apron.

"I think it's a good idea." Don was never more charming. His smile was quick and friendly as he took Mother's hand. "I think it's a good idea. Kathleen invited me for

din—for supper. I hope I'm not intruding."

"Not a bit of it." Mother beamed. "I'm as pleased to meet you as though it was in the parlor. It was naughty of you, Kathie, though. We're having a plain supper. If I'd known Kathie was bringing company, I'd fixed something special."

Rose laughed. "You aren't likely to starve on one of Mother's plain suppers," she said pleasantly to Don.

Being in a kitchen was a novel experience for him, Kathleen thought. She had a little difficulty removing him to the living-room. She left him there with Bud and returned to the kitchen.

"I could take the hairbrush to you," Mother complained, moving briskly between the table and the range. But she didn't mean it. Kathleen sensed that Mother was pleased because she had brought Don into the kitchen. That gesture seemed to have removed whatever suspicion Mother might have retained that she, Kathleen, was ashamed of her family. She had a new respect for her mother, remembering the manner in which she had greeted Don. It hadn't occurred to her that Mother had dignity. But she had, a dignity that came from just being natural, that was an instinct rather than an art.

She was glad she had acted upon impulse. Don's first visit was more successful than any arranged occasion could have been. She was moved by the efforts the others made to help her. Rose, over Dotty's sternly hushed protests, gave the children their suppers in the kitchen and took them off upstairs. Kathleen set the table, brought out the best china, and the candles left over from Christmas. Cliff came in through the kitchen with flowers from the greenhouse, early daffodils and freesia and Japanese iris with small blossoms a deep purple blue. He arranged them for her, taking pains to get an artistic effect. Mother, smothering minute steaks in a rich and fragrant sauce, hadn't time to think of the

flotilla of side dishes which usually cluttered the table. Kathleen, relieved and grateful, achieved a simplicity which would have been impossible if Mother hadn't had steak sauce and whipped potatoes on her mind.

Supper was a success. The candlelight shone on flowers and a freshly ironed Irish linen cloth. The room beyond the table was in shadow, concealing defects, giving an impression of space. Dad was friendly and pleasant, though he didn't say a great deal. Mother apologized for not having had time to change. She looked her best in the print house dress she wore, her cheeks flushed, her hair curling in moist ringlets. Rose had dressed neatly and Bud was scrubbed and brushed within an inch of his life. His hair was smooth and his fingernails clean. Even his freckles shone.

Watching, listening to the conversation which moved easily around the table, meeting Don's smiling glance across the flowers, Kathleen felt tension relax. They were so friendly and natural, that her heart filled with gratitude. Don enjoyed the good food Mother had prepared. He praised the steak sauce and the whipped potatoes and passed his plate back for a second serving. He talked of the spring baseball prospects with Bud and Cliff and Mother expressed her own lively opinions. His manner was perfect. He spoke of the Japanese iris and then of his mother's interest in flowers. He asked Dad if he planned an exhibit in the Flower Show and led Dad pleasantly into conversation.

Yes, she was grateful to the family. There was little to criticize. Mother, of course, commented upon the subdued light in the room and said she hoped they were able to find their mouths. Twice a sudden wail came from upstairs and Cliff left the table to investigate and Mother explained that the children usually had supper with the family. The telephone rang and there was a concerted pushing back of chairs. Dad told Bud to

answer it and the others settled back into propriety. That, Kathleen thought, moved to increased gratitude, was the supreme sacrifice.

She offered to help with the dishes after supper but Mother shooed her away from the kitchen. "He's a fine boy," she said in warm approval. "Just nice like the rest of us. You bring him for supper again. He eats like he was half-starved. That college food!" Mother sniffed.

She remembered the comment and the sniff later, driving with Don out along a country road. "What is it?" he asked, hearing the light laugh she gave.

"Mother is afraid you don't get enough to eat," she said.

"Why? Did I grab and gobble?" he asked in pretended dismay. "It's a good idea, though. Maybe she'll ask me again."

"She has. She likes you. She says you're just nice like the rest of us." She regretted having repeated the comment, afraid he might misunderstand.

His instant laughter disposed of regret. "Did she?" he asked. "I think she's grand."

"Do you?" She was unaware of wistfulness in her voice. She hadn't realized how anxious she had been until, now that the visit was over, she felt strain and tension relax.

"Why, of course," he said warmly. "I've never seen anyone like her. They're fine, all of them, friendly and natural. You must have fun together. You feel that in the atmosphere. You're crying, Kathie!—"

She gave a second quite audible gulp.

"No, I'm not," she said. "At least not very much."

He stopped the car at the side of the road and drew her into his arms.

"Did you think I wouldn't like them?" he asked reprovingly. "Have you been trying to warn me? Is that why you've talked of your family almost constantly?"

"Yes, I suppose so—"

"Little silly! Idiot!" The terms were endearments whispered against her cheek.

"But you—" There was a further confession she must make. She hesitated, searching for words. "You see, Don, Mother and Dad know of your family because—" She paused again, ashamed that it was so terribly hard to say.

He took up the sentence where she paused.

"—because your grandfather and father worked for the Kincaids?"

"You knew?" she asked, astonished.

"Certainly. That evening we met Joan and Ann and Ding Harrison on the boardwalk— Well, they were naturally curious about you, I suppose. Joan or Ann remembered your name. Don't ask me how women ferret out such things—" He seemed, all at once, as embarrassed as she had been. "They had the facts pretty straight when I saw them during Christmas vacation. Ann's mother recalls your grandfather and your father, as well. When I happened to mention your father's shop— Oh, good Lord!" he broke off irritably. "What difference does it make? I'm crazy about you, Kathie. I feel alive with you. Isn't that enough?"

From some source of pride and dignity she drew the strength to ask quietly, "Is it, Don?"

"It's enough for me," he said with rising emotion. "I wouldn't care if your family were Zulus with rings through their noses, you'd still be you."

She laughed shakily. "No, I wouldn't," she said. "I'd probably be a brunette."

"Kathie, darling! You sweet!" He held her closer. "You're so funny and dear. I *do* love you. Nothing else matters. Blast families, anyway! I wish we'd been descended from a long line of orphans!"

She should have been satisfied. There was reassurance

in the urgency of his arms, in the shaken timbre of his voice. She was confident that he was sincere. She knew that he loved her. But though strain and tension relaxed, though she was blissfully happy, deep in her mind a sense of dismay remained.

Facts were facts. He had told her more than he had intended to tell—

So the Prince married the beautiful Princess and the Little Mermaid dissolved into foam.

Only she wouldn't dissolve into foam. That might be peaceful and pleasant. She would be keeping on making corsages and funeral wreaths. And some day, when she was old and ugly, Don's son would come into the shop—

She laughed with the humor that usually put melancholy to flight.

"What is it?" Don asked.

She laughed again but she did not tell him.

Chapter Fifteen

BOTH OF THEM JEALOUS

"IT MUST BE A RELIEF TO YOU to have the room to yourself again." Hilda took careful stitches in soft white silk, her eyes fixed upon her work.

"Umm?" Kathleen hummed with a rising inflection. She pulled on sheer stockings cautiously, holding her breath.

"Daft!" Hilda commented dryly.

Kathleen's quick laugh was excited and gay. "Were you speaking to me?"

"Oh, no. I was just saying to myself that it's a blessing Rose and Cliff have a house of their own."

"I don't know. I miss them."

"You miss Dotty?" Hilda asked incredulously.

"More than you'd think." Kathleen buckled the straps of silver slippers. "She isn't always a brat."

"It must be love! Here's your slip." Hilda rose from the rocker, trim in a dark print dress correct for spring, every blond hair subdued and in place. "You were a sly one. No wonder you weren't interested in a business course."

"Thanks." Kathleen took the slip. "I don't know what you mean," she said.

"Oh, no, of course not! Don't yank, Kath. You have plenty of time. You'll pull that strap loose again. Have you met his family?"

"Whose family? Don's?" Kathleen extended her hands. "I told them I didn't want dark polish. And look!" she wailed.

"Take it off. Here, I'll do it for you." Hilda collected bottles from the dresser, a china bunny which contained

cotton, cleansing tissues, an orangewood stick. "You'd spill all over yourself. I never saw anybody so excited over a dance."

But Hilda, too, was excited. Though her remarks were characteristically tart and she pretended to scoff at Kathleen's whirlwind preparations, her manner toward her sister was unmistakably tinged with respect. She cleared the bedside table, placed it before Kathleen and drew up her chair.

"Sit still if you can." She uncorked a bottle and pulled a fluff of cotton from the bunny's tail. "This is a terrible shade," she observed. "You look as though you'd dipped your fingers in raspberry jam. I asked you if you'd met his family?"

"No," Kathleen said and was silent.

"When are you going to?" Hilda, ever practical, wanted to know.

"I don't know."

"Hasn't he asked you?"

"No. Why should he?"

"Don't ruffle your feathers. Will you sit still! I just asked." Hilda meticulously removed polish from Kathleen's nails and substituted a more delicate shade. "His father is dead, isn't he? He has one sister. She married one of the Owens of Owen, Aldrich and West, the brokers, and lives in California. Her name is Lindsay. Cute? She has two children, a boy and a girl. His mother goes in for supporting the symphony orchestra and day nurseries and flowers."

"Hilda!" Kathleen exclaimed in laughing astonishment. "How do you know?"

"Mimi Loring who works in our office used to work for Owen, Aldrich and West. She was secretary to young Owen before he went out to manage the West Coast office. I suppose Don will go into the firm with his uncles. I was in that office the other day. Mr. Kahn sent me

with some papers. It's not nearly so nice-looking as ours," Hilda said with satisfaction. "The furniture looks a hundred years old."

"It probably is," Kathleen said, remembering descriptive phrases Don had used. "Did you— Who did you see?"

"A secretary. She looks a hundred, too. His mother has a house in the Square. Jane and I walked up past it last Saturday afternoon. It doesn't look much from the outside. Old, like those houses are. The butler, I guess it was, was taking plants from a station wagon into the house."

"That was Wakefield." Kathleen waved one hand in the air to dry the polish.

Hilda glanced up from the second hand. "Have you met *him*?" she asked.

Kathleen laughed. "You don't meet butlers, do you? I don't know. I haven't seen him but Don speaks of him. Isn't Wakefield a lovely name? Sounds like a bishop, at least."

"He looked like a bishop, if bishops carry pots of hyacinths, which I doubt. They have that farm, too, of course," Hilda went on. "In the Valley near the Kincaids' where Grampa used to work. Farm!" Hilda added caustically. "They've been important so long they can call an estate a farm and get away with it. It's certainly not what you and I think of as a farm."

"Gracious!" Kathleen cried. "Have you been there, too?"

"We were going last Sunday." Hilda applied polish neatly. "But Jane's friend's car was out of commission. Mimi Loring has been there, though. This young Owen she worked for broke his leg riding horseback with Don's sister before they were married and Mimi was there several times. She says it's swell if you like things old and horses and gardens and dogs. Mimi saw Don a couple of times. She said she tried to break a leg so she could stay

there, too. There! You're finished. But don't touch anything. How did you meet him, Kath?"

Kathleen pushed back the table and left the chair, too excited to sit still longer.

"I was climbing a fence," she replied, flapping both hands as she moved in a dance step around the room. "I got caught in some barbed wire and there I hung."

"Oh, sure. I know!" Hilda returned bottles and bunny to the dresser, set the table where it belonged. "And Don came riding past on a milk-white charger," she went on, the unusual flight of fancy edged with sarcasm. "And he rescued you and you lived happily ever after. How *did* you meet him?"

Kathleen, humming, considered a reply. Hilda, demon statistician, would not be put off with fairy tales.

"He came in the shop one day," she began, wondering, oddly, if she would ever tell anyone how she and Don had met. "That's all, really. He asked me for a date and I liked him and went. Are my nails dry, now? Can I finish? It's nearly nine."

"I don't think you're telling the truth," Hilda said. "But that's your business. At least, as I told Mimi Loring, you didn't break a leg. Wait a minute." She lifted the froth of tulle and silk from the bed. "Here! Put your head through."

The tulle settled about her slenderness. The tight bodice, heart-shaped, hugged her breasts; excitement increased, humming through her nerves in tingling vibrations. She remembered, recaptured, the lovely feeling she'd had when she'd worn it last, when she'd floated out on the stage of the high school auditorium with Don's flowers in her arms—

"Stand still!" Hilda scolded, occupied with snaps and hooks and eyes. "I wouldn't wear anything that hadn't a zipper. Well, I don't know," she added after a moment. "I'll believe anything now. A female belonging to this

family going to a college dance."

"I know." Kathleen combed her hair, deepened honey-colored waves with her fingers. She wished Hilda would be like this when Don came, when they went downstairs, just natural and funny in her caustic way, without the "nice Nelly" airs she affected when there was someone to be impressed. That was too much to hope for, she supposed. This afternoon, when Hilda had come into the shop when Don was there—Hilda had seemed to feel obligated to correct whatever impression of the family Don had already formed. She discharged the obligation to the last set of rules in the *Book of Etiquette*. Don, though charming, had seemed a little dismayed.

Hilda was watching her, now. Hilda's reflection in the glass looked worried, concerned, almost pitying. Kathleen wondered what Hilda thought, what gossip she'd heard from her friends who worked in offices connected with the affairs of Don's family. She didn't want to know. She couldn't risk having her anticipations spoiled even a little.

"Well," she said, turning. "Am I all right? Will I do?"

"I hope so," Hilda said and the brief reply had the effect of a raven croaking a portent of disaster. "You *should*," she said, almost angrily. "You're lovely looking and have sense. I don't know what more they could ask."

Kathleen knew, without asking, the "they" to whom Hilda referred. Her spirits drooped, then lifted again as she removed the lid from a square glossy box elegantly inscribed with the name of a city florist.

"Look, Hilda!" she cried softly.

Hilda looked. "What is it?" she asked.

"It's a bouquet holder. See. You can carry it or fasten it on your wrist like a bracelet."

"That's cute." Hilda examined the container which held lilics of the valley, one small white orchid. "The silver looks old," she said, increasing interest in her

"Is it an heirloom? I mean did it belong to his grandmother or somebody in the family?"

"It's old, I guess. We found it in an antique shop. I liked it and Don—" A realization of all that Hilda's interest implied broke upon her and her voice faltered a little. "Don said his grandmother had one like it," she went on, somewhat less spiritedly. "He bought this for me."

"Oh!" Hilda said, losing interest in the Victorian trifle of filigreed silver. She was silent for a moment. Then—

"I'll bet you're more attractive than that Thayer girl, anyway!" she said crossly in a burst of loyalty and affection. "I'll bet she's not half as pretty or smart as you are, Kath."

"She's beautiful," Kathleen said quietly, then added, with a teasing smile. "I *have* met her."

"Well, for heaven's sake! Where?"

"In Atlantic City. A long time ago. Before Christmas. She was with Ann Kincaid and one of Don's friends named Harrison. They were married last week."

"Oh, yes. I remember." Hilda spoke as though she had been a bridesmaid, at least. "But this Thayer girl—Joan—"

She was interrupted by a shout from the second floor. Bud called, "Kath! Come on down!"

"Why can't people learn not to shout?" Hilda complained. "Sounds so common. What will he think?"

"Don? Oh, he's used to it, now." Kathleen caught up from the bed the white wool wrap she shouldn't have spent all that money for, an evening bag woven of white and silver beads, handkerchief, bouquet holder, the paraphernalia of a formal dance. "Don *likes* us, Hilda," she tried to explain. "He doesn't expect to be received by a butler when he rings the bell."

But she knew it was useless. She knew that Hilda

would apologize for Bud. She could almost see the phrases form in Hilda's mind.

"Shall I go down with you?" Hilda asked, smoothing her already smoothly waved hair, adjusting her belt, making sure that her handkerchief was in place.

Kathleen resisted an impulse to deny the request. But generosity triumphed. "Of course," she said. "Mother and Dad have gone to the movies. Someone must see me off."

She forgot Hilda, then, though she heard her sister's steps sounding with her own on the third floor stairs. Don was waiting. She hadn't seen him in evening clothes. She was going with him to a college dance. The silver slippers moved blithely, urged forward by expectancy. Tulle and silk whispered softly. The heart-shaped bodice moved with the beating of her heart. The fragrance of lilies of the valley breathed up to her as lightly, swiftly, she turned from the second floor hall toward the stairs.

Halfway down she halted so abruptly that Hilda, following, all but knocked her flat. She steadied herself, her hand on the rail, stood looking down into the hall. She didn't know that expectancy died out of her face or that astonishment parted her lips. She didn't know that disappointment succeeded astonishment until, recovering, she saw Joe's expression change from eagerness to questioning disappointment, to acceptance.

"He'll be along," Joe said and smiled, though there was, for an instant, no merriment in his eyes. "Hello, Kathie, Hilda. This is a fine welcome, I must say."

"Joel" The silver slippers ran fleetly, welcomingly, down the remaining steps. "Joel I didn't know you were coming. When did you get here? How long can you stay? I wasn't expecting—"

"So I see." He held her hand for a moment, spoke again to Hilda, turned to her. "You look like springtime in the Rockies. Where are you going?"

"To the dance," she said. She glanced at him, noting details, the new spring suit, the blue shirt and the darker blue tie, Joe's eyes, smoky gray with flecks of light, his ruddy coloring, the rebellious brown waves of his hair. "There's a dance at the college," she added, disconcerted by the rush of emotion she felt, looking away.

"Well, I'll be—" Joe said. "You!"

"Wonders will never cease!" Hilda said but with more complaisance than wonder in her voice. "Kathie got around Dad. Heaven knows how. Of course Don Alexander is unusually attractive. I suppose even Dad couldn't hold out against him."

"Joe! You'll be here," she said quickly, trying to make amends for Hilda's boastful complaisance. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

"I'll be here tomorrow."

"For dinner?" she urged.

"You probably won't be up in time for dinner," Hilda suggested.

Joe ignored Hilda. His glance, meeting hers, reminded her that he knew how Hilda's mind worked. For an instant shared amusement drew them together. Then diffidence separated them again.

"If your mother will ask me," Joe said. "How is she? How's your dad?"

"They're well. At the movies, as usual."

"That's fine."

A small silence followed.

"Is it working out, Joe?" Kathleen asked a little desperately. "How long will you be away?"

"Until the end of May."

"That's nice. That you'll be back then," she added quickly.

"Yes, I'll be glad to be home."

There was much that she wanted to ask him. She wanted, especially, to let him know that she was glad to

see him. She sensed that there was much he would like to ask her. Diffidence restrained natural impulse. Joe, usually at ease in any situation, was as tongue-tied as she. A fragile barrier of tulle and silk separated them, a pair of silver slippers, the delicate but persuasive fragrance of lilies of the valley, a trinket of filigreed silver.

"What have you—?" Joe began.

"Do you think you'll—?" Kathie said at the same moment.

They laughed diffidently, apologized.

"Excuse me," Joe said.

"It was nothing," she protested. "I—"

The bell rang. Joe turned to open the door. Kathleen took a step forward. He stood aside.

"There he is," Hilda announced in a flurried voice.

Kathleen opened the door.

"Oh, hello, Don!" He was handsome in a dark topcoat, his linen gleaming. The porch light shone on his smooth dark head. Her heart melted with love and pride.

"Hello!" he said. "Are you ready?" He bent toward her as though he meant to kiss her. She drew him into the hall. His expression altered when he saw the others.

"Good evening," he said to Hilda.

"Good evening," replied the disciple of Emily Post. Kathleen knew that a considered comment on the weather would follow.

"This is Joe Regan, Don," she said quickly. "Joe, this is Don Alexander."

"How do you do?"

"Glad to know you."

Joe and Don shook hands heartily. Kathleen glanced from one to the other. She hadn't realized how much more slightly built Don was than Joe. He was nearly as tall, though. His perfectly tailored topcoat made Joe's spring suit look new and a little clumsy. In contrast with Don's casual elegance Joe's hands looked too big and his

shoulders too broad. But there was something about him—

She waited while Don and Joe exchanged pleasantries. Though her heart melted with love for Don, she was proud of Joe. He took Don in his stride. His manner was easy and pleasant. She wondered what Joe thought, what opinion he was forming of Don. Not that it mattered. Oh, yes, it did. It mattered a very great deal—

Don turned to her presently.

"Shall we go?" he asked. He took her arm and turned her toward the door.

"Good night, Hilda," she said. "Don't wait up. Good night, Joe."

"Better put your coat on, Kathie," Joe said.

She had forgotten it. He took the white wool wrap from her, held it while she slipped her arms into the sleeves. She glanced back over her shoulder to thank him. The expression in his eyes gave her an oddly uneasy sensation. Dad looked at her with that expression, sometimes, when she left the house with Don. There was affection in the expression, tenderness, a little humor, considerable concern. But in one detail they differed. As, glancing up and back, her eyes met Joe's she saw the tiny flames flicker for an instant through tenderness and concern, through indulgent humor.

Her answering smile was uncertain. She glanced at Don. A shade of annoyance flickered across his face and then was gone:

"Good night," he said pleasantly and opened the door and led her out on the porch.

Annoyance remained.

"It's a lovely night, isn't it?" she exclaimed, aware of his irritated silence.

"Very nice," he said distantly.

She tried again.

"The trees are budding," she said a shade too brightly.

"Are they?" he did not glance up, as she did, into the branches of the maples, spreading in a dark tracery against the glow from the street light.

"Dad says a few days of sunshine will bring everything out," she went on.

He made no reply. He opened the door of the car and settled her inside. She sat in silence, bewildered and miserable, while he opened the opposite door and swung in under the wheel. The motor groaned and spluttered, then steadied into a purr.

"Don— Please, darling! What is it?" She laid her hand on his arm.

"What is what?" The car rounded a corner sharply.

"I don't know. That's the trouble. You're acting—" Her voice trembled.

"Who is this Regan?" Don asked abruptly.

"Joe? He's a friend of Matt's, my older brother. They were in high school together."

"Is he the Regan who played football?"

"Yes—"

"I've heard of him, then. My cousin was in prep when he played on the team. Best school player in the country in his time. What is he doing now?"

"He works for Dad. Just now he's learning the rose business. He's been away for several weeks. He came home unexpectedly today. His family lives here in town."

"Regan at the college?"

"Yes," she said, as stiffly as he, thinking she sensed condescension. "Joe's father is—"

"Oh, I know Regan," Don said a trifle more pleasantly.

"In my salad days he got me out of a good many scrapes. The fellows all like him."

That seemed to dispose of the Regans. Don turned the car up the avenue toward the gymnasium. Kathleen, beside him, tried to shake off depression. She was going to her first college dance. But she didn't feel excited and

happy. Don was spoiling everything. She glanced up at him sidewise, now and then. His profile, in the light from the dashboard, looked sulky, like that of a spoiled little boy. There was no *reason* for it, she told herself. Well, she wouldn't make overtures. If they danced in stony silence all evening she wouldn't speak again until he spoke. She wouldn't utter a word!

He spoke at last. "This Joel!" he broke out indignantly. "Did he think I didn't know enough to hold your wrap for you?"

"Well, Don, you *didn't* hold it," she pointed out.

"I didn't, did I?" He laughed, reluctantly at first and then with appreciative humor. "And I get mad as a hornet because he thinks of it."

"Is that why you've been haughty?" She laughed, too.

"That and the way he looked at you," Don went on. "As though he were lending you to me, like a book I might enjoy but must return."

"Don!" she cried softly. "You're—jealous!"

"Of course I'm jealous," he admitted. "That big good-looking gent acting as if he owned you but would kindly consent to share his good fortune with me."

"Oh, Don! You're crazy!" There was, though she was not aware of it, triumph as well as relief in her light gay laugh. "Joe has known me forever. He buckled on my first pair of roller skates. He took me to my first dance."

"That's why I'm jealous." He spoke more gravely. "He's known you since you were a kid. Your family and his are probably friends. He works with your father. You've lived and thought alike."

"I suppose so. But Don, why—"

He interrupted the slow puzzled question.

"I'm so crazy about you." The words came swiftly, with a sincere urgency. "That's why I forgot to hold your wrap. Just seeing you in that white dress knocked every other thought out of my head. Kathie, I mean it,

it? I've told her about you."

"What have you told her?"

"That you're a darling and I like you."

"Is that all?" she asked, more wistfully than she knew.

"That I have more fun with you than anyone I've ever known," he went on. "That you look like an angel which is deceiving because you have a good deal of imp in your soul. That you have a lovely voice and the longest and curliest lashes this side of Hollywood."

She should have been satisfied. She wondered, though, whether Don's mother would consider the items he mentioned desirable qualities in a—well, why not face it?—in a daughter-in-law. She was healthy, too. Don had overlooked that virtue. She felt a little hysterical. What if she should say to Don's mother, "I'm healthy, too." Panic made whirligigs of thought. Bracing lectures did not help.

The Square was thronged with couples strolling along the walks, nursemaids with perambulators, children playing. Don parked at the curbing before a tall brick house, red with trimmings of smooth white stone. Windows glittered and curtains hung in stately folds. She thought of Hilda walking past, wondering about the interior, perhaps, catching a glimpse of the butler. She should be walking past with Hilda, now, instead of going inside with Don. Be natural, she kept telling herself. Silly to be frightened. They wouldn't devour her. Oh yes, they might. In a gulp.

Don held her arm, talking. There was a flight of stone steps. With each step they ascended her panic increased. He used a latchkey, ignoring the bell and the knocker of polished silver which looked a hundred years old. He opened the heavy front door and led her into the hall. The light was dim. There were dark waxed floors, rugs in soft faded colors, carved white woodwork, an open stairway leading up to enormous heights. Don glanced

at the tall clock in the hall.

"Mother will be listening to the concert," he said. "That's a Sunday afternoon ritual."

She clutched at a straw. "Maybe we shouldn't disturb her," she said.

"Nonsense! She'll be glad to see us."

She thought his voice lacked confidence. For the first time it occurred to her that Don was nervous, too. She remembered how she had felt when she'd taken him home for supper and, sympathizing with him, panic receded a little. She looked at him. Their glances met. He smiled encouragingly.

"Mother will be in her sitting-room upstairs." He led her along the hall.

A door opened and closed. Footsteps sounded. A figure came toward them from the far end of the hall.

"Hello, Wake!" Don called.

He did look, advancing toward them, as she imagined a bishop might, portly but very erect. She didn't know how he managed to walk with his chin at that angle without falling. The floor, in the spaces between the rugs, was as slippery as glass.

"Oh, it's you, Mister Donald," he said. "I thought I heard someone come in."

"This is Wakefield, Kathie," Don said. "Miss Miller, Wake."

Wakefield inclined his head in so far as his collar would permit.

"Good afternoon, Miss," he said.

Kathleen smiled, not certain that a reply was expected. The butler's manner was incurious, formally polite. She wondered if he had heard her discussed, what thoughts revolved in the baldish dome of his head. She knew, for Don had told her, that Wakefield had been with the family for years.

"Your mother is in the small sitting-room," he said to

Don. "Your aunt and uncle are with her."

"Which ones?" Don asked.

"Your Uncle James and Aunt Emily."

Don groaned and Kathleen saw a suspicion of a smile quirk the butler's lips.

"Can't we come again, Don?" she asked. "If your mother has callers—"

"No. Let us be brave." Don held her arm firmly. "I'm disappointed, though. I wanted you to see Mother first alone."

She felt the butler's glance follow them as Don led her along the hall. The house was handsome but a little gloomy, she thought, glimpsing through open doorways a room which was surely the library, a long room with delicately shaped furniture and a crystal chandelier. The treads of the wide stairway were shallow and carpeted in a lovely shade of silvery green. Their footsteps made no sound as they walked up the stairs. Thinking of home, she wondered if the quiet here, protected by high ceilings and thick walls, by rugs and draperies and decorous manners was ever disturbed.

The question, almost immediately, received a reply. When they reached the second floor hall, she heard an elderly voice, masculine and curiously toneless, raised in a querulous question. A woman's voice, also elderly, replied, strained to a thin and patient pitch. A more youthful voice, pleasant though apparently lifted beyond a normal tone, gave assistance. Don groaned and grimaced, then smiled as she glanced at him.

"Uncle James is one of the great-uncles," he explained. "He's very deaf." His expression, in spite of the smile, looked grim. "Never mind, Kathie," he added. "We won't stay long."

The room at the end of the hall was cheerful. That was Kathleen's first impression as Don led her to the open door. A bay window, gracefully curved and with

many small panes, filled one wall. Sunshine streamed in through thin glass curtains over pots of hyacinths and tulips, over apricot chintz patterned with bright bouquets, over family photographs and framed prints against cream-colored walls. It fell, too, upon the white head of a stout old gentleman who sat, filling it to capacity, in an armchair; his feet, in soft square-toed shoes with elastic sides, rested upon an ottoman covered with needle-point roses. He was a well-groomed old gentleman. His linen glistened. His bow tie, nearly hidden beneath pink folds of flesh, was a butterfly poised for flight.

He saw them first.

"Well, young fellow," he said loudly. "We were just talking about you."

"I was afraid of that," Don said in a normal tone which the old gentleman could not possibly hear. "Don't try to speak to him, Kathie," he added. "Shake hands and turn on your smile."

The pantomime which followed increased the sensation she had of moving through a dream. She smiled, as Don had advised, and extended her hand. The old gentleman clasped it, without rising, released it, inspected her with curiosity and appraisal. His expression was pleasant. His skin was pink and white. His eyes had a merry twinkle although his voice had sounded querulous. This, of course, was "Uncle James."

Don retained his grip upon her arm. He turned her from the armchair.

"Hello, Mother," he said.

The woman who rose from a sofa in the bay window was Don's mother. She didn't look as Kathleen had thought she might but Don was like her. She had expected his mother to be either youthful and smart or frankly middle-aged and imposing. She wasn't either, exactly. She was slender and not above average height, simply dressed in thin dark silk. She had dark eyes, like

Don's, and that smooth pale tan skin. Her dark hair was mixed with gray, brushed back from a widow's peak and pinned in a thick knot at the nape of her neck. She wore no jewels or make-up. Reading glasses, one round shining eye, swung from a silver chain.

She came across the room to meet them. Her expression was pleasant but controlled. Her movements were unhurried.

"Don!" she said. "I didn't expect you."

"You don't object to surprise visits, do you?" He kissed her cheek. "Mother, this is Kathleen."

Don's mother was only a little taller than she. Kathleen met the level, not unfriendly glance of dark eyes like Don's. "I've been hoping to meet you." Don's mother took her hand.

She was friendly and yet— Kathleen told herself that she was sensitive without cause, that the antagonism she thought she sensed was purely imagination. What more could Don's mother have said to her, a stranger. She must not look for slights. She smiled quickly, as though in apology and Don's mother returned the smile.

"How pretty you are," she said.

"I told you." Don sounded relieved. He turned her toward the third occupant of the room. "Aunt Emily," he said, "this is Kathleen."

She had scarcely noticed the small, elderly woman seated on the edge of a straight chair near the old gentleman. She looked at her now. Aunt Emily was all blending tones of gray, her dress, her hair, her skin, except for the flush of faded pink which colored her cheeks as she took Kathleen's hand.

"You *are* pretty," she said in a faint echo of the words Don's mother had used.

"Thank you." Kathleen wondered if Aunt Emily's comments were always echoes. She looked as vague as an echo from far away, a small gray moth with fluttering

movements. She wore on her tiny veined hands the most magnificent diamonds Kathleen had ever seen.

"Come sit here with me." Don's mother slipped her arm through Kathleen's and drew her toward the sofa. The old gentleman sat forward in his chair.

"Who is she?" he asked. "I didn't catch the young lady's name."

Don bent over him and shouted.

"Who?" The querulous note sounded in his voice again.

Don exclaimed in an exasperated undertone.

His mother smiled. "Use the speaking tube, dear," she suggested.

"He won't touch it," Aunt Emily fretted. "It's a new one and works splendidly, but he won't use it. Let me try, Don. He's accustomed to my voice."

Aunt Emily shouted. Don shouted. Kathleen forced back hysterical laughter as her name echoed and re-echoed through the room. Finally the old gentleman repeated it correctly. Satisfied, temporarily at least, he settled back in the chair and folded his hands across his stomach.

Don's mother led Kathleen to the sofa. Don pulled a chair forward, facing them. His mother took the conversation in hand. It started briskly. What a lovely day! Yes, wasn't it? Spring had come at last. Were there many cars on the road? Yes, the nice weather attracted motorists. No, she had missed the concert. Aunt Emily and Uncle James had had dinner with her. Did Kathleen hear the Philharmonic on the radio Sunday afternoons? Not this afternoon, of course. She was eager to move to the farm, though her daughter, Lindsay, Don's sister, insisted that they spend the summer with her in California. She would move out to the farm the first of May ~~even~~ if they went to California later. She had plans for the garden—

Conversation gradually languished. Aunt Emily wasn't much help. Her occasional comments were vague. Uncle James, hearing nothing, closed his eyes, opened them to glance at her curiously, closed them again.

She was making a poor impression. Don's manner became increasingly more strained. He made an effort to ease the situation.

"Tell Kathleen about your rose gardens, Mother," he urged. "She's an expert on flowers."

Poor Don! Trying so hard, the darling. That was unfortunate. The figure of her grandfather, the Kincaids' gardener, came, a disturbing shadow, into the room.

"There isn't a great deal to tell." Don's mother was beginning to look a little weary. "Kathleen can probably give me pointers on growing roses."

"Oh, no," Kathleen said. "We haven't grown them. We're planning to, though. We're building greenhouses this summer."

"Are you? That will be interesting."

"We think so."

"Roses are my favorite flowers," Aunt Emily offered. "Do you grow them in your conservatory? We have no luck with ours."

"Kathleen's father is a florist," Don said.

"Oh yes, of course." The gray moth fluttered. "I remember—" She broke off and made a quick substitution. "What is that variety I like so much, Ellen? The orange ones with red thorns."

"I suppose you mean Talisman, Aunt Emily." Don's mother said. Her smile looked a little forced. "Yes," she added, "they're very pretty."

Conversation faded again. Again Don attempted to revive it.

"Kathleen is interested in dramatics," he said brightly. "Kathie, tell Mother about the play."

He wanted her to be bright and amusing. She had

amused him with a recital of the mishaps involved in staging the play. Why couldn't she just be natural? Don's mother's attention was wandering. Kathleen sensed that she wished they would go.

"It was only an alumni play," she said. "At the high school."

"How nice! It's an interesting hobby. Are you fond of the theater?"

"The theater? Oh, yes—"

"We usually have Guild subscriptions. I haven't seen anything this winter."

"Mourning," Aunt Emily said. Her eyes, like faded forget-me-nots, meeting Kathleen's glance, filmed with moisture. "Don's father. Dear Jerome. I still think, Ellen, that he should have been buried beside his father. It's so selfish of Andrew to want that lot reserved for himself."

A silence followed. Uncle James opened his eyes. He leaned toward his wife and asked in what he undoubtedly intended to be a whisper, "Is she the one, Emmy? Is this the girl?"

If they had accepted it as a joke, she wouldn't have minded. If Don's mother had admitted her into the intimacy of laughter, she wouldn't have been offended. But while Aunt Emily's hands fluttered to silence the old gentleman, Don's mother talked with composure of the approaching May Market, covering an awkward situation with tact as smooth as icing and nearly as sweet. She glanced at Don. His expression was furious. A dull flush burned in his cheeks. He rose, when his mother came to a stop, and pushed back his chair.

"We're going now, Mother," he said.

"Oh, no, dear." But she, too, rose. "You and Kathleen must have tea with me."

"We'll stop for dinner along the way."

"Well, perhaps you'd rather."

They made farewell speeches to Aunt Emily. They shouted at Uncle James. Don's mother went downstairs with them, walked with them to the front door.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's unfortunate that Uncle James was here."

"Understatement if I ever heard it," Don said shortly.

His mother laughed. "Don't look so grim, darling." She placed her hand on his arm. "Uncle James is an old man and very deaf. He doesn't always get things quite straight. I'm sure Kathleen understands."

No use being surly. No use giving Don's mother reason to think she'd been badly brought up. "I do understand," she said and smiled. "My mother's Aunt Ida is as deaf as a post."

"You see, Don. Kathleen understands. She's a sensible child. You must bring her for a week-end at the farm."

Don's face brightened a little. "I mean to bring her for a week-end," he said. "But just the same, you tell Uncle James for me to go pick himself a thistle."

She saw, then, what Don meant when he'd said his mother wasn't stuffy. She was conscious of a charm which had, until that moment, been withheld. She realized how amusing and pleasant Don's mother probably was with her friends and relatives, with Don's friends of whom she approved.

"But, darling," she said gaily, mischief in her sparkling glance. "Uncle James couldn't *stoop* to pick a thistle. Perhaps Aunt Emily might. But she'd prick her fingers, poor dear!"

Don's mother wafted them away in a breeze of friendliness. But Kathleen was not deceived. It was done to soothe Don's annoyance and not from any real friendliness toward her. Uncle James had explained the situation. She was "that girl."

"Do they call me 'that girl'?" she asked, when they had driven in silence for a number of blocks.

"Who?" Don asked, looking straight ahead. His jaw line was still grim.

"Your mother—your relatives—"

"That girl!" Don repeated stiffly. "You make it sound—"

"—like a wild oat. It does, doesn't it?"

He didn't say, "Wild oat, my eye! You look about as wild as a stick of peppermint candy." He was in no mood for teasing tenderness. Well, neither was she.

"Wild oat?" he said, instead. "Where did you get a notion like that?"

"It was perfectly obvious." She knew that he was ashamed, that he wanted desperately to make amends. If she looked up at him, if their eyes met, she would make a generous gesture. Hurt pride forbade. She sat erect, looking straight ahead at the rear of the car in front of them, a jallopy with a sign which read: *Excuse my dust.*

"Why weren't you yourself?" he flung out accusingly. "Natural and gay and sweet—"

"I freeze up in cold storage. I'm funny that way. It must be the Irish in me."

"Cold storage! What rot!"

"I'm sorry if you were ashamed of me."

"Ashamed? Kathiel! What nonsense!"

She stared hard at yellow letters on a bright green background. *Excuse my dust.* The sentiment seemed appropriate but was expressed with more jauntiness than she felt.

"Well, you said—" she began. Her voice faltered humiliatingly.

He broke down, then.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "Sorry and ashamed."

"It wasn't your fault."

"I didn't know— Mother is usually—"

"She was nice to me, Don. She tried hard."

"That's just it!" he burst out. "Mother tried. I tried. You tried."

"I didn't help matters much. I gave a fine imitation of a frozen clam."

"You were sweet."

That helped a great deal.

"You were generous. You make me ashamed. I suppose that's why I— Forgive me, Kathie." The pleading note in his voice melted her heart. "I shouldn't have flared out at you. It was just—"

"I know."

"It was awful, wasn't it?" He seemed to find relief in words. "So stuffy and formal when I'd wanted Mother to meet you naturally. And then Uncle James letting off that blast."

"He thought he was whispering. He didn't intend to be rude."

"You *are* sweet, Kathie. You know, of course. I've told them—told Mother—that I want to marry you."

Her breath caught in her throat. "When had you planned to tell me?" she asked, after a moment.

"I've been telling you. When I look at you. When I kiss you. I've been telling you for weeks."

"Have you?" She laughed, a low shaken laugh, quickly stilled. "I can't be very bright."

"You knew."

"Yes, Don, I knew."

"Mother was fine about it. There'll be family powwows, of course. The tribe will assemble. But that doesn't matter. When they know you, they'll love you."

"But if they shouldn't—?"

"It won't make any difference. At least not to me."

"Do you believe that, Don?"

"Believe it? Of course I do. I found you. You belong to me."

She should have been satisfied. His voice was confident.

The smile he gave her when she smiled at him was reassuring. But he was driving away from them, now, away from family councils, from opposition, from cousins and uncles and aunts. She remembered with what envy and self-reproach he had spoken of his friend Ding. "He has the courage of his convictions. That's more than can be said of some of the rest of us."

Courage! Had Don enough? It wasn't as simple as he made it sound. She sighed and folded her hands in her lap.

Chapter Seventeen

TENSION AND STRETCHED NERVES

DON BELIEVED IT from Monday morning until Saturday at noon. He believed it seven days in the week if he remained in town for the week-end. When he was with her he was confident that family opposition would not influence the plans he made for them. The plans varied according to his mood.

"They don't need me in the office," he said one evening after he had skipped two week-ends at home. "I'll get Mother to let me take over the farm."

"What do you know about farming?" She accepted his enthusiasms lightly, listening with responsive interest but placing no more confidence in them than if they were tales of pure invention.

"What do I need to know?" he inquired blithely. "Jason has been in charge for twenty years."

"But what would you *do*?"

"Oh, breed horses, maybe. That's a full-time job. We'd live there all the year around and Mother could spend the summers with us."

She thought that extremely unlikely. Don, on second consideration, apparently thought it unlikely, too.

"Well, we don't need a place as big as that. Too much responsibility. Do you know where Ann and Ding are living? In a remodeled barn. It's darned attractive. We could find something like that and I could commute into town. Ding drives in every day."

"I'd like that," she said, but with no greater a sense of reality than if Aladdin had offered her his lamp.

"We could have an apartment in town for the winter. That's easier in bad weather and would probably be

more pleasant for you."

"Oh, I like the country."

"I know you do. But you like parties, too. Having a place of our own would be more fun than staying with Mother or at a hotel."

So he thought they would be invited to parties if Don married her without the approval of his family. How, knowing him, her earlier impressions had changed! She'd thought, the evening she'd first had dinner with him, that he seemed far more mature than his actual age. His easy casual manner, his air of distinction, had made her feel like a child a bit retarded mentally, certainly inexperienced and distressingly naïve. Now, she felt older than he, wiser, more practical. Common sense tempered romance. Star dust no longer impaired her vision. Don's enthusiasms were pure fiction. She knew that. But did he?

He did not admit that knowledge. But plans varied with varying moods.

"Let's go to California," he said on a later evening after a week-end at home. "Everything different. Oranges and apricots growing on trees; summer all year long; the Pacific Ocean for a change. Lin's husband would wangle me a job with his firm, maybe. I can't see myself selling bonds. The legal department, perhaps."

"All right. That's fine, Don. Let's go."

"You'll like Lin. She's a honey, even if she is my sister. No use settling down right off. We might as well see something first."

And then later—

"I have a cousin in Hawaii. Uncle Oliver's son. He operates a pineapple plantation."

"Pineapples, Don?"

"No kidding. Acres and acres of pineapples. They can the juice."

"How did a cousin of yours get that far from home?"

she asked with unintentional sarcasm. She was hopeful of finding one black sheep in the pristine flock.

"He married a girl from Baltimore whose father owns the plantation," Don replied, unaware of sarcasm. "I could pick pineapples, maybe. Let's go out there."

She wondered if he realized that the plans he outlined were invariably connected with his family. It apparently did not occur to him that he might make his way independently, on his own. It was a little frightening to consider the strength of the opposition. She thought of it as infrequently as possible. But facts were facts that couldn't be blinked. Star dust lost its magic except when Don did not speak of the future, when they were happy in the moment, dancing out of doors, now, in the courtyard of the Pheasant Inn, riding along country roads, seated together in the swing in the back yard at home.

The opposition was at work. Family councils were assembled. Don did not speak of them, but he looked tired and tormented when he returned from a week-end at home.

"Mother sent you her love," he would say, casually, making no point of it.

"That was nice of her," she would reply.

"She wants me to bring you to the farm. She's going to write to you."

She didn't believe it but she refrained from expressing doubt in words. Don, the debonair, when he returned would seem so dispirited, so glad to be with her again, so dreadfully tired. He wasn't accustomed to opposition. He'd been too gently bred to think independently or fight back. Things had come to him easily all his life. He hadn't been faced with situations which developed strength of will. When his charm failed, his humor, his easy casual manners, he was bewildered and helpless. He disliked friction, arguments, high words.

The unacknowledged pressure resulted in frayed

nerves and frequent irritations. Don urged her to let him talk to her mother and father.

"But what will you tell them?" she asked.

"That I want to marry you."

"That's fine—so far. But what then?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Dad will ask you if your family approves. What will you tell him?"

"That it makes no difference."

"It will make a difference to Dad."

"For heaven's sake why?"

She was really angry, then. High words followed.

"Do you think Dad will be willing for you to marry me if your family doesn't want me? He knows them. He's worked for your neighbors but he has pride, too. My family cares quite as much about what happens to me as yours does about what happens to you."

"Oh, Kathie? Darling! I didn't mean—"

"I'm sorry. I know you didn't."

"I'm sorry, too. Please, Kathie. I love you so."

They quarreled about Joe, if high words from Kathleen and restrained irritability from Don could be so termed.

"He's always around," Don complained. He had come for her one evening and found her in the back yard finishing up a game of croquet with Dad and Bud and Joe. She had knocked Joe's ball off into the hedge and was so intent upon aiming straight for the stake that she didn't notice when Don walked around the side of the house. "Yippee! We've won, Dad!" she cried and, flushed and laughing, turned. Don's expression had been shadowed with annoyance. He called to her and was polite to the others. But when they were alone he complained.

"Well, he's at home, now, Don, and he works with Dad. What do you expect?"

"Nonsense! He's in love with you."

She didn't deny it. She sat in the swing beside Don, feeling suddenly tired. The flush of triumph receded, all the pleasure she had had in the hilarious game was gone.

"He's an old friend, Don," she said.

"Yes, I know. He buckled on your first pair of roller skates and took you to your first dance."

"Well, he did." Resentment kindled, shot off sparks. "You have your friends, Don. Why shouldn't I have mine?"

"No reason at all." His tone was restrained. He lit a cigarette.

She felt that she must defend Joe. Even if Don was angry, even if he sat there blowing smoke rings, apparently indifferent to her.

"We're all fond of Joe," she said warmly.

"So I've noticed."

"He's grand when you know him."

"Of course."

"Do you expect me to forget all my old friends, Don?" she asked.

He threw away his cigarette. The tip traced an arc against the deepening dusk.

"I'm sorry," he said, contrition in his softened voice. "I'm jealous, Kathie."

"That's flattering but unnecessary."

"You seem happy when you're with him. I've noticed. Why aren't we happy, Kathie?"

"I'm happy," she protested as his arms went around her.

"You don't laugh as you used to laugh. We quarrel."

"You don't know *how* to quarrel, Don." Her soft laughter shook. "You just get haughty. Don't be jealous of Joe."

"I'll try, but loving you—I *do* love you."

"I love you."

And presently they were happy again. Dusk darkened to night. Stars shone and the air was fragrant with the scent of mock-orange blossoms. This was their world, then, the canvas swing with the creak in its chains, the thick smoothly cut grass, darkness, the stars.

But they quarreled again and again. Don called her one afternoon at the shop. "I can't see you tonight," he said. "I've got to study. Nose to the grindstone again, worse luck!"

"You told me," she said. "That's all right."

"You don't sound crushed." His voice coming across the wire sounded plaintive.

"I wasn't expecting you, so I have a date."

"A date—?"

"Yes," she said a little nervously. "Ever hear of the American institution known as the date?"

"With whom? Where are you going?"

"It's a kitchen shower for Thelma and Emil."

"You're going with Regan?"

Resentment was kindled again.

"Yes, I'm going with Joe."

A silence. Then—

"Well, all right. Have a good time."

"I will. Good-by, Don."

She hung up, resentful but close to tears. He called her immediately to apologize. Happy again, they talked for half an hour.

The tension, the sense of waiting, unacknowledged but ever present, stretched nerves to the snapping point. But there were lovely times, too, as the spring days lengthened. Don took her to a fraternity dance and was proud of her popularity.

"Just a glamor girl," he accused, cutting in on one of his friends.

"I try," she smiled up at him.

"Happy?"

"Ummm!" she murmured. "It's fun."

"Love you."

"Love you."

She was uneasy when the note from his mother came, inviting her for a week-end at the farm. It was cordially worded. No matter how often she read it, she could find nothing but friendliness in the neatly penned lines.

"Shall I go, Don?" she asked, showing the note to him. "Does she really want me?"

"Little nut!" Don was happy and relieved. "Of course she wants you."

She said nothing to spoil his pleasure but her thoughts were not reassuring. She fussed about clothes, driving Mother wild. Dad bought her a suitcase. She packed it carefully, folding garments in layers of tissue paper. If a maid unpacked it she'd find nothing to criticize. Dad had been kind about money. She had a spring suit, two linen frocks, a tissue gingham evening dress. Don had told her that they didn't dress in the country.

He came for her at noon on Saturday. Home had never seemed so safe a haven as when she went with him toward the waiting car. Mother and Dad waved them off from the front porch. Bud came tearing around the side of the house to shout "Good-by!" She wished, as Don started the motor, that she had refused the invitation. She had a crazy impulse to open the door and jump from the moving car.

But Don was in fine spirits. The weather was lovely. He liked her new flannel suit. Perhaps the invitation meant that Don's family had decided to accept her. You tipped a maid if she did favors for you. The fashion magazines said that gingham was correct for country evening wear. The flowers Dad had arranged were a proper hostess present—

Don relaxed behind the wheel as the car sped out of town. "Well," he said, smiling. "We're off for a buggy

ride, darling."

Yes, they were off. She returned his smile. They were off, all right. She hoped she wouldn't be obliged to walk back.

Chapter Eighteen

TEARS IN A GUEST ROOM

SHE'D HAD NO IDEA it would be so lovely. She had driven through the Valley, and Dad had pointed out places along the road. Enormous trees screened the house. There was a winding lane. When, suddenly, she saw the house, low and rambling, built of stone that shone silver in the sunlight, she gave a little gasp.

"It is nice, isn't it?" Don said, delighted with her appreciation. "The central portion was built in seventeen something or other, before the Revolution. Mother will supply facts and figures. The wings were added later, of course. It all ties in pretty well."

"It's the most beautiful place I've ever seen."

And Don had blithely suggested that his mother would hand it over to them, the lawns, the trees whose branches seemed to touch the sky, the rolling meadows fenced with rails, the stream that ran tranquilly between willows. She couldn't believe that people really lived here. It was like a painting, still and serene, in the late afternoon sunshine. Simple, but with a simplicity that she felt by instinct to be the height of swank. She walked from the car with Don over a flagstone terrace to the front door. The knocker was shaped like an eagle. The brass, from generations of polishing, had a dull luster. It looked as though it might date from the Revolution and have been polished every day since. The eagle's feathers were worn smooth.

The door was unlocked. Don pushed it open and led her inside. There was no gloom here. The wide hall was flooded with sunshine from a door at the opposite end. Beyond she caught a glimpse of a garden and recognized

the slender figure in the light dress and wide-brimmed hat. She felt panicky for a moment. Then a maid came into the hall.

"Hello, Jenny," Don said.

"Good afternoon." The maid smiled at Kathleen. She was young and pretty. Her uniform was becoming. "Mrs. Alexander is in the garden," she said.

"Thank you, Jenny. Have Tim take in the bags. Come, Kathie. Let's find Mother."

Don's mother came to meet them in response to Don's call. He kissed her.

"Well, here we are."

"I'm glad to see you." She pulled off a loose gardening glove and took Kathleen's hand. "We're transplanting seedlings," she said with a quick friendly smile.

"Mother is a real dirt farmer."

"Heavens! Does it show on me? I was just going up to bathe and change."

This reception was different from the first. That had been unexpected. Don's mother was prepared for this. It was less difficult to be natural out of doors in this lovely, sunny place. She could be herself, perhaps, gay and sweet as Don would like her to be. But she remained silent. Beyond the first greeting, she couldn't think of a word to say.

"Kathleen will have the blue room." His mother took them in hand. "I've told Jenny to look after her. You needn't change before tea, dear. I've invited some of your friends for supper and the evening."

Kathleen, watching, saw a shade of annoyance pass over Don's face.

"Why did you do that?" he asked.

"I thought you'd want them to meet Kathleen."

"Of course. But this week-end—we expected to spend the time with you."

"An old lady like me!" Don's mother laughed. "That's

flattering, my dear, but I won't accept the sacrifice. Joan has guests and Ann and Ding are entertaining the Gibsons. I'm sure Kathleen will enjoy them. There will be no opportunity tomorrow." She smiled at Kathleen from under the wide brim of her hat. "When you live in the country, your city relatives come to call on Sunday."

Relatives! They were coming to look her over. Panic pushed up into her throat. She glanced at Don. His expression was grim.

But panic presently receded and Don's face brightened. He led her away for a tour of the place. There were horses in the stables, their coats glossy and ruddy brown like horse chestnuts. There was a new foal with startled bright eyes and long spindling legs. Don introduced her to the stableman, to a gardener pruning rosebushes. He whistled and a cream-colored great Dane, as large as a calf, came galloping to meet them.

"Whoa, there!" Don cautioned, laughing. "Mind your manners, fellow. Don't knock the lady down. This is Leif Ericson, Kathleen."

"Hello, there." Kathleen stroked the soft muzzle. Panic had retreated to a safe distance. Don was in high spirits again. The dog nuzzled against her hand. "Nice little lap dog, Don."

"He thinks he is. All right, then, come along. You've made a conquest, sweet."

"That's encouraging. Who's keeping score? Chalk one up for me."

They returned, finally, to a walled garden at the rear of the house. The grass was like moss. A houseboy in a white coat and the maid Don had called Jenny were arranging a table for tea. They went away when she and Don appeared. Iris grew against the walls, shades of bronze and yellow, lavender deepening to purple. A fountain threw jets of spray into the air, dripped musically into a stone basin. Feathers of fern grew in the crevices

among the stones, clumps of small bright flowers. She went closer to the fountain.

"Goldfish, Don!" she exclaimed. "Such big ones. And a turtle."

"He's older than I am, or so Mother says. She insists that he's been here forever."

The turtle was motionless on the rim of the fountain, basking in the last warmth of the setting sun. He blinked his thick eyelids.

"He's flirting with you, Kathie. Old roué."

"No, he's just old and sleepy and the sun is in his eyes."

"Nonsense! He knows a pretty girl when he sees one."

She glanced up at him, laughing. Emotion quivered across his face. In a moment she was in his arms.

"Kathie," he said softly, confidently. "It's all right, darling. I love you. Nothing else matters."

"I love you."

"You're crying!"

"I'm not. Well, maybe. It's just—all this. Being here with you. This place is so lovely it makes me ache."

"That's what you do to me."

"Silly! Darling! Don!"

They were happy and safe there together. The sun disappeared, leaving a luminous glow. A gentle wind stirred the iris blooms. The turtle blinked thick sleepy lids.

Happiness lasted through tea. They sat side-by-side on an iron bench. Don's mother sat at the opposite side of the table so that, beneath the fall of lace and embroidered cloth, Don held her hand. That gave her confidence. Conversation was easy and pleasant. Don's mother really seemed to like her. And yet—

The maid, Jenny, went with her to her room.

"Would you like me to help you?" she asked.

"No— No, thank you."

She breathed more easily when the maid had gone away. She bathed in the glittering bathroom. The plumbing, obviously, did not date from the Revolution. She dressed slowly in the big softly lit room with powder blue wallpaper patterned with pink and white dogwood, white Venetian blinds, white rugs on the dark polished floor. The tissue gingham looked fresh and crisp. A last glance into the mirror sent her out into the hall with confidence. Chin up, Kathleen. But don't slip on the stairs. Just be natural. Everything's fine.

Chin up through introductions.

"Mrs. Gibson, Miss Miller. Mr. Gibson."

"How do you do?"

"You've met Ann and Ding."

"Oh, yes. On the boardwalk at Atlantic City."

"Hello, Kathleen." Don's friend Ding was pleasant. She remembered that she had liked him instinctively when she had met him first.

"It's nice to meet you again." She liked Ann, too. Her voice was cordial. She was more attractive than she had thought. She had lovely eyes.

"Thank you."

"You've met Joan, too," Don reminded her.

"Oh, yes—" Sea-green eyes and bronze-colored lashes. A piquant face. Beautiful manners.

"Yes, indeed. How do you do?"

She didn't know just when her confidence began to sag. Supper was pleasant. She sat between Ding and a blond young man whom the others called "Skip." She was conscious of the service, at first, fearful of making a mistake. She was, just at the beginning, more interested in the room and the table appointments than in her companions. It was all so simple and yet again with that simplicity which she felt to be utter swank. The maids wore black at night with sheer aprons and fluted caps. The china and silver were lovely. You could see your

face in the surface of the long oval mahogany table between the lace and linen mats.

The young man whom the others called "Skip" was in his last year at college and had examinations on his mind. He was so ridiculously gloomy that soon she was laughing. Ding was entertaining when the melancholy young man turned to the girl who sat at his opposite side. It didn't matter, then, that Joan Thayer, seated beside Don, gave her full attention to him. Don glanced past her piquant profile frequently. Through the candle-light, across flowers, their eyes met and his smile told her that he was proud of her. Splendid. Fine. Chalk up another mark for her.

But after supper her confidence lagged and her spirits drooped. She went with the others to the game room, a fearsome place, she thought, with stuffed animal heads on the walls, racks of guns behind glass, shelves of trophies, ribbon rosettes with gilt printing in glass cases. The floor had been cleared for dancing. There was an electric Victrola. The houseboy, who had taken her bag upstairs, sorted through records.

Nobody danced. They gathered in groups on the leather upholstered settees and chairs. The young Mrs. Gibson who was visiting Ann and Ding corralled Don. She bred dogs, it appeared, and was interested in the ribbon rosettes. The others were pleasant to her. They made a real effort, at first. But she knew nothing of the things in which they were interested and presently their attention wandered. They talked together with a good deal of animation while she listened with a set little smile that made her face feel stiff.

It seemed to her that hours passed before Don and young Mrs. Gibson abandoned the subject of dogs. He came to her, then, sat beside her.

"Hello," he said blithely, "do you remember me?"

"Just barely."

His eyes clouded.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Nothing—"

But he seemed to know.

"Let's dance," he said.

The houseboy started the Victrola. They danced. The others paid no attention to the music.

"The others don't want to dance." She drew away from him. "Please, Don. This is silly."

"Just as you like."

The evening dragged. The others seemed to enjoy themselves. But she was the outsider. She didn't know the rule. She might as well have been deaf and dumb. Don's glance pleaded with her. They danced again. She felt like a wooden doll, stiffly jointed, with a smile painted on its face. The houseboy served drinks and animation increased. Ding danced with her. The others danced. Don danced interminably with Joan Thayer.

Someone finally spoke of going home. The party scattered in search of wraps. She stood between Don and his mother in the hall to say good night to the guests.

"It's been pleasant to meet you."

"Thank you."

"Wonderful party, Don. Good night."

"Ride in the morning?" Joan Thayer asked Don.

"I don't think so. Kathleen doesn't ride."

"But, Don," she spoke quickly, "I don't mind."

"Of course she doesn't," Don's mother gave her a smile. "Ride if you like, dear. I'll take care of Kathleen. She can help me with the flowers."

"Good night. How about dropping in tomorrow afternoon?"

Don's mother answered Ding. "I'm afraid that won't be possible. We're expecting callers tomorrow."

The door closed after the last guest.

"Did you have a nice evening?" Don's mother asked.

"Yes, indeed. Thank you."

"Rotten," Don said, abruptly.

"Darling! Why?"

"It doesn't seem to occur to our little friends that any normal person might eventually become a little fed-up with horses and dogs."

"Gracious!" Don's mother looked weary and her smile was a little strained. "They're your friends, dear."

He ignored the gentle reminder. "Kathleen and I are going out for a drive, Mother."

Her heart leaped. That was what she wanted. To find Don again, to be alone with him. In the friendly dark, under the stars—

"It's late." Don's mother frowned, then smiled. "I don't think I'd go out tonight. Kathleen is probably tired."

A protest rose to her lips. The words were not spoken. She understood. She knew what was expected of her.

"I *am* tired," she said.

"Kathie, please—"

It was hard to resist his pleading glance. But she knew what she must do.

"No, Don, really. Not tonight. I want to go to bed."

He didn't insist. If he had— But Don disliked making scenes.

"Good night, Kathie," he said.

"Good night, Mrs. Alexander. Good night, Don."

She felt his glance follow her as she walked up the stairs, her hand trailing along the banister. She held her head up proudly and did not glance back. It wasn't far to her room—

Soft lights were lit in the room with pink and white dogwood on powder blue walls. The covers of the four-posted bed were turned back. She had never slept in a room so lovely. She closed the door and turned the key softly.

A fire, ready for lighting if the morning should be cool, was laid on graceful brass andirons. Ruffled curtains stirred in the evening wind. There were stars out of doors and the friendly dark. She would have found Don out there, alone with him. His mother had gracefully prevented that. And Don hadn't insisted—

She had never slept in a room so lovely. This was what she had wanted all her life. There were monogrammed linen sheets on the bed. The counterpane, neatly folded back, looked as though it was woven from cobwebs. She thought suddenly and with longing of her own room on the third floor at home. She threw herself face down on the soft pink blanket and wept.

Chapter Nineteen

HOPELESS FROM THE FIRST

"GRACIOUS, BUT AIN'T IT HOT?" Miss Jennings leaned against the sink and fanned herself with her apron. Moisture beaded her upper lip. Her hair straggled in damp wisps from under the dust cap, invariably pink and ruffled, which gave her the appearance of a sparrow dressed for a masquerade. "I don't know as I ever remember such weather in early June."

"It's always hot for Commencement. I've never known it to fail." Mother's cheeks were crimson. She rubbed the back of her hand across her forehead, and whirled the egg beater briskly. "Don't you think we should order up ice cream from Hartman's, Kathie?"

"No, I don't." Kathleen shook sprigs of mint from the tightly wrapped bunch and began to pick over the dark green aromatic leaves. "I've told you, Mother. There's nothing so messy as half-melted ice cream."

"It doesn't seem like much to give them," Mother worried cheerfully. "Just iced tea and those thin little sandwiches and strawberries and cakes. I wouldn't want Don's folks to think we're stingy."

Don's folks! It had a nice homey sound. Well, that was the way Mother would treat them. If they came—

Her fingers shook with nervousness. Don had seemed confident, but he hadn't called her today. Last night he had promised to bring them, his mother, his aunts, and his uncles. Mother had insisted. She'd talked of nothing else for the past two weeks. Well, there was nothing to do but wait and hope and keep busy. The mint was fresh and crisp. Nice of Joe to get it for her. At Don's home, at the farm, there had been sprigs of mint in the

"That will be plenty," she repeated patiently. "I've told you, Mother. It's tea. Aren't the berries beautiful? Don't stem them. You dip them in powdered sugar."

"Well, what do you know?" Miss Jennings marveled. "Live and learn. I never heard of that way of eating berries. Mr. Jennings likes them in shortcake with plenty of cream."

"My idea exactly." Mother added coloring, drop by drop, to the icing in the bowl. "We might make up chicken salad. There's a hen in the refrigerator," she suggested hopefully. "Would there be time?"

"No, and we don't need it." Kathleen's voice was tense. "There'll be the Commencement luncheon and the president's reception. We needn't have given them anything except something cool to drink."

"What kind of way would that be to treat Don's folks?" Mother asked indignantly. She iced the small cakes set out on cooling trays, making swirls with the pastry tube. "It's funny Don didn't want you to go to Commencement," she added.

She had wanted to go. She had wanted to see Don receive his degree and walk across the campus with him as sisters and sweethearts did when the ceremonies were over. She had thought he might ask her to go with him to the president's reception. Her new dress, sheer shell-pink with the pleated skirt, would have been nice. The wide-brimmed hat that was so becoming. White kid sandals. She had bought them for Commencement. She had thought—

But Don hadn't known she had wanted to go.

"I won't ask that of you," Don had said when she had made a casual reference to Commencement. "It's boring and will likely be hot. I'll be tied up with the family. You needn't think you must. I'll see you afterward, as soon as I can break away."

She hadn't insisted. She had tried not to feel disappointed. It wasn't really important. She wished he had wanted her there, though, his best girl, with his family, with him.

But—

"Hot as it is?" she asked, now, in reply to Mother's question. "Commencement isn't very interesting. Just dull speeches and standing around. Don said he wouldn't ask it of me. He said I'd be bored."

The glance Mother gave her told her that Mother was not entirely convinced. She was familiar with that glance. Since she'd spent the week-end with Don at the farm she felt that Mother sensed her uncertainty, the unhappy state of her mind. Dad watched her, too, with kindly affection and concern. They had asked no questions. They hadn't needed to ask, she supposed. She was "as moody as a molting chicken," Mother said, either quiet or feverishly gay. She was thinner. Her eyes looked enormous. She didn't sleep very well.

"It looks nice." Miss Jennings darted to the kitchen door and looked out. "It's sort of cute having a tea party out of doors. If a thunderstorm don't come up."

Mother glanced at the clock. "It's past three," she said. "You go up and have your bath, Kathie, and get out of the way. Rose said she'd be in about four. I'm sorry for Anna May to miss meeting Don's folks but we wouldn't want to have to take her to the hospital in the middle of the party. Too bad Hilda's not here. She'd have wanted to do everything different, though. I don't know what makes her so contrary. She's exactly like Gramma Miller, God rest her soul. Everything's ready. You go on."

"And I'll clear up." Miss Jennings clattered at the sink. "You go have a rest, too, Miz Miller. You want to look nice. The uniform fits fine, Kathleen. It was a mite long but I turned up the hem. There's not a snitch of

crimp left in my hair," she mourned. "Mr. Jennings told me. 'You leave them curlers on, Vi'let,' he said. 'You know how your hair gets this weather. Like seaweed.' That's what he said."

Seaweed. The little mermaid. *So the Prince married the beautiful Princess.* Kathleen felt suddenly faint. Nothing was worth this terrible uncertainty. She closed her eyes, then opened them. Things stopped whirling. The range, the sink, the little cakes spread out on the table were back in their accustomed place.

"Crimp or no crimp, don't wear that dust cap." She laughed, shaken laughter which jangled oddly. "Be sure there's *plenty* of ice, Mother. And use the new glasses, please, not the ones with the ships."

"Oh, go along." Mother made a shooing gesture with her apron. "Might think I never gave a party before." Her voice softened. "Don't you worry, Kathleen. Everything will be fine."

If they came, she would know they had decided to accept her. She consumed as much time as possible in bathing, dressing, combing her hair. If even Don's mother came with him, she would know. He had promised Mother.

"Maybe they, your family, won't have time," she had said, wanting to provide an excuse for him, trying to avoid an issue which Mother, innocently, or by design, forced upon them.

"Of course they will," he had said confidently.

"But your mother—" she had persisted, knowing that she would displease him, that in a moment they would quarrel.

"You're wrong about Mother." He was displeased. She felt his instant resentment. "She likes you."

"Oh, yes, in a way. She would *like* to like me. If I just belonged."

"You're too sensitive. You imagine slights."

"She doesn't stoop to slights. None of them do. They're just freezingly courteous."

"It's got to be an obsession with you. Don't you see?"

"Yes, I see."

"You're a little nut. You're ridiculous."

"Thank you."

They quarreled so often, if chilling politeness could be termed a quarrel. They would drive, walk, sit in the hammock in the back yard, silent, resentful, avoiding each other's eyes. Then one or the other would make a gesture and they would draw close together again. In the car, in the hammock, he would hold her in his arms, repeating her name, whispering broken phrases, his lips against her ear. He loved her. She did not question that. He was torn by loyalties as she was torn. He was as uncertain, as unhappy as she. Pitying him, she would forget herself. She would comfort him, her cheek against his, her hand stroking his forehead until he caught it and kissed the palm and the tip of each finger. Pitying her, he would talk endearing nonsense until she smiled. The dark moment would pass and they would be happy again.

If Don's mother came, she would know. Her room on the third floor was stifling. No need to hurry. She had plenty of time. But it drove and harried her. She pulled on the shell-pink dress. A hook caught in her hair. She made a sound like a sob.

She couldn't rest or remain upstairs. Don had promised Mother. He wouldn't disappoint her. She would know by Don's mother's attitude, by the attitude of the others, whether they had come willingly or Don had forced them to make this gesture of friendliness. Don's face would tell her. She knew it so well, now. She was no longer deceived by his casual manner, by the good breeding which concealed emotion. She would know—

She went hurrying down the stairs, white sandals moving swiftly, sheer pink crepe pleats fanning against her legs. Mother was in the bathroom. Mother was singing. Through sounds of splashing she heard Mother's voice, excited, anticipating a party—

"Roll out the barrels," Mother sang with lusty good cheer. "We'll have a barrel of fun."

She laughed. But laughter, catching in her throat, came through her lips in a sound like a sob.

The first floor was tidy and in order. She went out into the kitchen. Rose had arrived. She was eating one of the small cakes Mother had iced.

"Hello!" she said. "You look nice. That's a pretty dress."

"You look nice, too."

"I hope so. I've done my best. I feel like a tub of butter melting away."

Rose was thinner since she'd been eating her own cooking instead of Mother's. She'd had her hair and nails done. Her summer print, blue with small white figures, looked simple and cool. Kathleen glanced at the kitchen clock. It was after four.

Miss Jennings came in from the laundry.

"Do I look all right?" she asked anxiously. "I don't know as I got this head thing on the way it should go."

"You look swell," Rose said comfortingly.

She looked like a comedy maid in a high school play, Kathleen thought, remembering the trim maids in apricot for the morning, white for luncheon, and black at night, who moved quickly and quietly through the rooms and across the lawns and terraces at "Farmfields." She'd known that having Miss Jennings was a mistake. But Mother had insisted. Well, it was too late, now.

"Stylish today, aren't we?" Rose adjusted the head frill so that it looked a little less like a fluted bandage.

"Not a mite of crimp in my hair," Miss Jennings

mourned. "Mr. Jennings said this morning, 'Vi'let, you leave them curlers be.' He's a great one for noticing. Mr. Jennings is. How'll I know when you want things brought out, Kathleen?"

"I'll whistle. Through my fingers like this." The sound Rose made was as shrill as a siren.

Miss Jennings looked startled. "My land!" she exclaimed. "Will that be polite?"

"Rose is teasing. I'll let you know."

She would have hysterics if she contemplated Miss Jennings further. "Come see how it looks," she said, and led Rose through the kitchen door.

"Fine," Rose said. She walked with Kathleen across the grass which Dad kept thick and green and neatly mowed. "Isn't it more trouble than inside, though? Aren't you afraid Vi'let will fall head first down the kitchen porch steps?" Rose's voice altered. "It looks perfectly wonderful," she said in sincere appreciation of the effect her sister had achieved. "Somebody must have done a lot of work."

The back yard looked "perfectly wonderful" to Rose. Seeing it through her sister's eyes, Kathleen agreed and was satisfied. The tea table was set under the horse chestnut tree. She and Dad had painted the lawn furniture white. The new deck chairs were gay in the mottled shade of spreading branches. The hedge of Christmas trees concealed all but the peaked tops of the green-houses. A walk led in from the street past the side of the house. Beyond the low privet hedge which bordered the walk stretched Dad's cutting garden, a bright and varied tapestry of bloom.

Having tea out of doors had been an inspiration. She couldn't imagine Don's mother and the parrot lamp in the hall under the same roof. She had talked down Mother's objections and planned and worked and prayed that the weather would be fine. She'd felt that she, her-

self, could be more natural in this setting than in the house. There would be subjects for conversation, too. Don's mother was interested in flowers. She would show her the moonflower vines on the trellis, the hedge of Christmas trees. Dad would be more at ease out of doors than in the house. Don's mother would see them at their best, she had thought.

Yes, to Rose the yard looked "wonderful." But Rose hadn't seen "Farmfields," that lovely old stone house, silver in the sunlight, with tawny flecks and shades of amethyst if you looked carefully. Rose hadn't seen the flagstone terrace, the lawns that were as soft and green as moss, the tall trees whose branches seemed to touch the sky. Rose hadn't had tea in a walled garden where a fountain splintered into crystals against a hemlock hedge and sprayed into a basin where goldfish darted and a turtle blinked wise old eyes from an edging of stones with ferns growing in the crevices, periwinkle, clumps of mountain pink.

"He's flirting with you, Kathie."

"No, he's old, Don. Your mother says— See, the sun is in his eyes."

"He knows a pretty girl when he sees one, old roué. Don't pay any attention to him, darling. I'm here. Pay attention to me."

"Are they snooty, Kath?"

Rose's voice seemed to come from a distance.

"What?" she asked absently. "Snooty? Oh, no. They're pleasant. They have beautiful manners. No swank or swaggering. They live simply."

But a simplicity that was utter swank. You were deceived by the ordered ease and beautiful manners. Beneath lay rules which you were born knowing or never learned, a complicated pattern of thought and behavior. Their tact was more intimidating than open hostility. You couldn't fight back. Don's mother, his aunts and

cousins, Joan Thayer—

"Like Don," Rose said.

"Yes, like Don."

But like Don as he would be when he accepted defeat, when he stopped trying to fight back. Like Don would be when he married Joan Thayer or one of those pretty well-mannered girls she had met at "Farmfields." When? That was an admission. She pushed at the thought as though it was a tangible object she might move by force. Her hands lifted, then fell limply. Again the sound that slipped through her lips was like a sob.

"Kathie! What is it?" Rose asked, concern in the question.

"Nothing." Kathleen smiled. "Let's see if Mother is ready."

Mother was ready to receive her guests. When they went back into the house Mother was coming downstairs. Why had she chosen that dress? Kathleen questioned silently. The flower pattern on a background of blue chiffon was too large and too brightly colored. It did nothing for her figure, or rather it did too much. But Mother was beaming. Her cheeks were flushed under a film of pinkish powder and her hair curled moistly around her face, in ringlets against her neck.

"I'm dripping already," she said cheerfully. "Oh, you're here, Rose. Will you fasten these beads? No use asking Kathie. She's too excited."

Rose fastened the double strand of imitation pearls.

"Is Dad coming?" Kathleen asked.

"Joe just brought him. I asked Joe to stay but he had to go along. Dad is taking a bath. I laid out his things. What time did Don say?"

"Around five."

Mother billowed to the living-room door. "Quarter of," she said. "Hadn't we better wait on the porch? How'll they know it's in the yard?"

A protest formed on Kathleen's lips. It remained unspoken. What difference did it make? She waited with them on the porch. Mother and Rose rocked and fanned themselves with souvenir fans from Silver Lake Park. They talked of Anna May's baby which was expected any day. They talked of the car Cliff wanted to buy, of Junior's rash, of the crepe-paper costume Rose was making for Dotty's part in the second grade entertainment with which the school term closed.

Kathleen sat in silence beside them, her fingers pleating her handkerchief, her eyes looking off down the street toward the corner. If they came she would know—

"Don't look so grim, darling. Kathleen understands."

"You are generous, my dear."

"It must be dull for Kathleen just watching you play."

"Oh, Kathleen doesn't ride. Perhaps she'll arrange the flowers for me then."

"Kathleen doesn't mind, do you, dear? She's a sensible child."

Weapons against her. Softly spoken, beautifully enunciated words. Don's mother, watching her, watching Don—

But they *must* come. Don had promised. He couldn't disappoint Mother. A clock inside the house struck five tinkling notes.

Dad joined them on the porch.

"Well, everything ready?" he asked.

"Everything's fine." She forced animation into her voice. Dad had taken pains with his appearance. His skin looked like polished leather above the stiff glossy white of his collar. He had scrubbed with a vengeance, the darling! His "good" suit looked heavy and hot. He must be uncomfortable. But his glance, meeting hers, assured her that he meant to stand by her, that he would see her through.

If she'd written a note to Don's mother at the Inn—

If Mother hadn't asked Don to bring them here—

Time passed. The conversation dragged. The others kept glancing toward the corner, now. She couldn't sit still on the porch. She made an excuse and went into the house. Quarter of six. Miss Jennings sat perched on the edge of a kitchen chair. She was waiting, too.

"Ain't they come yet, Kathleen?"

"Not yet."

"Could I set out the sandwiches?" she asked, fidgeting, wanting something to do.

"No— Oh, all right. I don't care."

The sun, sinking, glinted on the glass roofs of the greenhouses. The lawn was entirely in shade. She walked slowly down the kitchen porch steps. It was a back yard, that was all. But Don had liked it. They'd had supper out here last Sunday night. She touched the spoons on the table, the embroidered napkins she'd borrowed from Anna May, the handpainted plates Hilda had done for Mother. Don would call her if anything had happened. If they weren't coming, he would call—

He was going home, tomorrow, tonight. Commencement was over hours ago. Perhaps he had already gone. His mother, tactful, reasonable, charming, would accomplish her plans. He would go with her to California. But surely not without telling her, not without saying good-by—

The evergreen hedge, still holding the warmth of the sun, gave off a spicy fragrance. She was reminded of Christmas Eve. A melody ran through her mind. Words, sung with laughter then, accompanied the melody—

"Hark the herald angels chant

Joe please do, 'cause Kathie can't."

She couldn't. She couldn't face this. But of course she could. She winked to clear her vision and lifted her chin. "Uppity," that was what she needed to be. The white sandals went hurrying across the grass, along the walk,

past the house, up the front porch steps.

Rose was speaking. She broke off when she saw her sister. Three pairs of eyes were fixed upon her with affection and concern.

"No, I guess they aren't coming," she said. Her voice was steady, light, even gay. "But that's no reason for wasting a party. Let's have tea in the garden. Just us."

The indignation in Mother's face softened. Dad's glance told her that he was proud of her. Rose pushed back her chair.

"Now don't be rushing things, Kathie," Mother said. "There's likely some reason why they haven't come."

"Well, it's six o'clock and past," Rose pointed out. "I should think that if they *were* coming—"

"—that they'd be here. I agree with you. Come along. Just us."

Dad and Mother exchanged a glance.

"No need to be hasty," he said.

"Hasty! I'm famished. And Vi'let is getting uneasy. Come along."

They went with her when she insisted. They walked around the side of the house to the tea table under the tree.

"Well, this looks nice." Dad, bless him! was playing up. He seated Mother with ceremony. Rose, her eyes dark with indignation, but smiling her wide lovely smile, sat beside the table. Kathleen went to the kitchen porch and called Miss Jennings.

She appeared in a twinkling. The head frill had slipped to a rakish angle. Beneath it Miss Jennings cocked a bright and inquisitive eye across the yard.

"They come?" she asked in a shrill whisper.

"You may serve now," Kathleen said.

Miss Jennings, making note of the familiar group seated beneath the tree, looked bewildered, but she scurried back into the house without further question.

Kathleen started back across the grass. A sound, coming from the front of the house, brought her to a stop. She heard a car slide in to the curbing, the rasp of brakes hastily applied. If it *was* Don, he knew they were here. She couldn't have moved. She stood, tense and still, watching the corner of the house, her heart beating in her throat.

She heard his steps on the concrete walk. Only his steps. She knew before he came around the side of the house that he was alone. He looked tired, she thought, seeing him before he saw her. Even his steps sounded weary, plodding along the walk, weary and reluctant, lacking the eagerness with which he usually came to her. But he smiled when he saw her, an uncertain smile, defeated, pleading, which melted her heart.

"Hello, Kathie," he said.

"Hello, Don."

His glance went past her to the group under the tree. He saw the table set for tea with Anna May's napkins and Hilda's hand-painted plates. He saw the new deck chairs and the lawn furniture painted white. He saw Mother in her flowered chiffon. He saw Dad. He saw Rose. Kathleen, watching, saw suffering in his eyes, in the sag of his shoulders, in his uncertain smile. He went directly to Mother.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Mother asked me to thank you and bring you her regrets. It was my fault entirely. I didn't mention your invitation until she came this morning. Mother had an engagement for this evening. She had to rush off with the others. She hoped Kathie, you, would understand."

It was beautifully done. His manner was perfect. But it wasn't true. And Mother knew that it wasn't true. Her face crumpled and hurt expression clouded her eyes.

The spark of independence which had so often flared briefly and flickered out, blazed, now, into a flame. Kath-

leen took running steps forward across the grass. She didn't mind for herself. At this moment she did not think of herself or of Don. The resentment that flushed high color into her cheeks and burned in her eyes was for Mother, for Dad. The slight to her seemed unimportant in comparison with the slight to her family. They had offered their best to Don and his mother, generously and with no calculating motive. Their generosity had been ignored. Well, she would make what amends she could.

"We understand, Don," she said clearly and steadily. "What's the use of pretending?"

He turned to her. "Kathie—" he said pleadingly.

Mother's misty blue glance was fixed upon her face. Dad was watching her; Rose. She felt the strength of their affection and she felt that her loyalty, welling up through misery mercifully unrealized, was a compensation to them for wounded pride. It gave her strength to do what she must do quickly, before resolution weakened, before misery destroyed pride.

"It's no use, Don." She held her head high. "There's nothing to say that hasn't already been said. Nothing more except—good-by."

"Kathie! Darling! Please—" He took a step toward her.

She drew back from his outstretched hands. The suffering in his face wrung her heart. But she must not falter now. She must do what must be done.

"It's been hopeless always, from the first." She pronounced each word slowly, distinctly. "Tell your mother—Kathleen is a sensible child. Tell her—Kathleen understands."

He attempted to speak but made only a low inarticulate sound. He looked away from her, his shoulders sagging again, defeat in the reluctant movement of his hands.

Mother left her chair. She went swiftly to Don.

"There! There!" she said and Kathleen saw tears in her eyes. "You've done what you could. Kathie's right. She doesn't mean to sound hard. Your folks are right, too, maybe." Mother patted Don's arm gently. "Don't you think hard of them."

It didn't matter that the flowers which patterned her dress were too large and too brightly colored. It made no difference that the beads she wore were imitation pearls. Kathleen saw Don's arms go around Mother through a shimmer of tears. She did not weep for herself, or for Don. She wept because she was proud of Mother, because Mother made no gestures, because she had a dignity which came from a warm and generous heart.

Chapter Twenty

STARS STILL SHINE

THE BULBS IN DANGLING GREEN SHADES were lit. The workroom table was cluttered with snips of ribbon, with fallen leaves and petals and bits of fern. The night air, coming in through open windows, was warm and fragrant. Dad, at the far end of the table, wired lilies of the valley, gardenias, maidenhair fern into a bride's bouquet. Joe checked labels on boxes of assorted sizes as Kathleen's pencil moved slowly down a typewritten list.

"Six bridesmaids," she read from the list.

"Only six?" Joe inquired. "Local society must be slipping. I don't see how the Kenworthys will be able to hold their heads up after this."

Kathleen smiled. Her lips curved only faintly but it was a smile.

"Two flower girls," she read on. "Sweetheart roses and forget-me-nots. Don't sprinkle them, Joe, or the lace paper frills will be spoiled."

"Right," he said.

"The bride's mother—orchids." She consulted the list.

"Doesn't the groom's mother get a break?"

"Orchids, too. I don't see—"

The telephone rang and she did not complete the sentence. Her eyes widened and she made a choked exclamation.

Joe took a step forward.

"I'll answer it," he said.

She shook her head. "No—I've been expecting—It's probably for me—" She drew the instrument toward her, lifted the receiver, said faintly, "Hello—"

"Philadelphia is calling Miss Kathleen Miller," the

operator's voice announced with a professional lilt.

"This is Miss Miller." She glanced again at Joe. He watched her with a concerned and gentle expression.

"Shall I—? Your dad and I—?" he asked hesitantly.

"Would you rather—?"

"Please—"

Don's voice came to her, then, faintly through a crackling sound. Straining to hear, frantic lest the thin thread of sound should be broken yet dreading the conversation, she did not know when Joe and Dad went out of the workroom into the greenhouse beyond.

"Hello!" she repeated. "Hello! Don?"

The wire cleared.

"Hello, Kathie." He might have been here in town. He might have been at the fraternity house calling her to make a date, or just to talk or say "Good night, sweet. Happy dreams—"

"Yes, Don—"

"I called the house." Eagerness had gone out of his voice. He sounded as weary as she felt. "Your mother said you were at the shop."

"Yes," she said. "Yes, we're working tonight. There's a wedding tomorrow."

"Oh!" He was silent for a moment. Then, "Kathie, we're at the station."

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I know. You told me— You're leaving tonight—"

"Kathie! Darling! Won't you change your mind?"

"I've told you—"

"I know. But it would be so easy, darling. There'll be a local in fifteen minutes. You could meet me at the station. I'd see you in less than an hour. See you, Kathie."

"No, no, Don! Please—"

"We could be married, darling." Eagerness warmed his voice again. The words came to her in a rush across the wire. "Married," he repeated. "Tonight, tomorrow.

"There's a place in Virginia. We'll buy a car."

Strange that she wasn't tempted. Strange that she'd had the strength to keep saying no. He'd called every night since she'd told him not to come again. Every night she had waited with dread and expectancy, wandering restlessly through the house, out into the yard, remembering, thinking, waiting for Don's call.

"No! No!" she repeated, her voice rising. She was tired, so dreadfully tired.

"It will be all right, sweet," he urged. "Once we're married, we'll be married and that will be all."

"It won't be all. You know it as well as I do. There'll be our lives to live, yours and mine. No, Don. No!"

"If you cared enough—"

"How can you say that when you know—"

"Then let me catch the local—"

"No, Don, no!"

"You're a stubborn, pig-headed—"

"I'm a sensible child—"

"Don't say that again." He was shouting. Then, "Kathie, I'm sorry." His voice broke. "Keep me, Kathie. I'm lost without you."

Her heart ached. But she was tired, so dreadfully tired.

"I can't," she said. "You make it so hard— Please, Don!"

"I must go, then?"

"Yes—"

"You'll let me see you when I return?"

"No— Yes— Perhaps— No, Don, no!"

"Good-by—"

"Good-by—"

"I love you—"

"I know. Good-by! Good-by, Don!"

She heard his voice, shaken, still pleading, as she placed the receiver on the hook. "Good-by, Don, good-

by"—The end of a dream. She dropped forward against the table, her head on her folded arms. Gradually pain receded and quiet, a sense of relief from strain, settled down upon her like light and enfolding wings. Her mind was at rest. She had done what she'd had to do.

She did not know when Joe came back into the work-room. She was not conscious of his presence until he called her name. She lifted her head. "Well, that's that," she said.

"Kathie, you sound so—" He was scowling, though there was gentleness in his eyes. "Let's get out of here. Your dad will finish. He told me to take you home."

"I don't want to go home." There were memories at home. She couldn't risk losing the peaceful feeling she had now. She couldn't risk starting up the pain in her heart.

"Let's ride, then."

"All right. Fine."

Joe's car, with the top lowered, stood in front of the shop. He helped her in and closed the door. She settled back against the seat, moving carefully for fear the pain would start again. Joe set the car in motion. He did not speak to her. He drove through the business section, past the deserted campus, along College Avenue. She forced herself to look at the old trolley station with its one dim and unshaded light.

"Are you hitch-hiking, lady?" Don's voice, talking nonsense. The smile that deepened the scar under his eye.

"Yes, kind sir. Could you give me a lift?"

"That depends." His bright dark glance that was like a caress. "Where are you going?"

"To Kalamazoo."

"What a coincidence! I'm going there, too. Hop in."

But the pain did not start. She rested her head against the back of the seat and looked up at the sky flowing

past, very dark and clear and spangled with stars. They were on the train now, perhaps, settling in a drawing-room for the trip to the coast. She, herself, had never seen a drawing-room except in magazine advertisements, the movies, or when a through train passed. His mother would send Lucy away to wherever maids settled for a trip. She would be talking to Don, making little jokes, to divert his mind, being tactful and charming. Well, for all her charm and tact she'd have a difficult time with Don. Just at first, at least. After a while it would be easier; he would begin to forget.

"Snobs!" Joe burst out gruffly, as though he followed her thoughts.

"No, they aren't," she said.

"For Pete's sake!" Joe grumbled. "Don't defend them."

"But I understand," she said. "It wouldn't have worked out. I didn't know the rules."

"Rules! That wouldn't have mattered if he'd had—Excuse me, but I've got to say it or explode—if he'd any guts."

"I know," she agreed gently. "If he'd had enough."

But Joe didn't know. He had no idea how much courage Don would have needed. That week-end at "Farmfields." The relatives who had come to inspect her. Uncle Oliver and Aunt Caroline. Aunt Eloise and Uncle John. Great-uncles James and William. The cousins. The girls who had been invited to meet her, Joan Thayer, the others who knew the rules. The shock troops kept moving up with reinforcements. Limousines which should have been in a museum, station wagons, town cars. Queen Mary hats riding high on waved gray hair. Beautiful manners. Chilling politeness. Sweet reason. Tact—

"Come away with me, Kathie. Once it's done, it's done."

"I won't marry you that way, Don."

"But if I don't care, why should you?"

"You would sometime. You'd hate me, then."

"Do you think I'm a weakling?"

"I think—I know—you haven't courage enough."

But quiet folded her in light and sheltering wings. The car sped along over the smooth ribbon of road. The wind blew her hair back from her forehead. Her shoulder touched Joe's. In the light from the dashboard she saw his big hands on the wheel.

Odd that the pain was gone. Saying good-by to Don was like an operation. You dreaded it, knowing it must come. You thought you couldn't endure the pain. And then when it was over you felt quiet, as she felt now, limp and exhausted, but relieved. And the pain was gone. You recovered slowly. Maybe you had a relapse. Some time she would read in the paper that Don was engaged. Perhaps she would read of his marriage to Joan Thayer or one of those other girls who knew the rules. Maybe, then, she would feel the pain again. But it wouldn't last. Maybe tomorrow she'd want to die. Maybe she'd just feel peaceful like this.

"Tired, Kathleen? Do you want to go home?"

"Oh, no. Let's keep on riding."

"Okay." Joe's voice sounded pleased. "That suits me."

There, just ahead, was the Pheasant Inn. No cheating, Kathleen. No, she wouldn't close her eyes. The orchestra played out of doors where tables were set in the courtyard. She and Don were here that night after Commencement. She wouldn't think of that. A fragment of waltz music blew across the road as the car sped past.

• "What is that number they're playing?" Rain against the windows. Red plush curtains. Pale wine in a tall stemmed glass. Don smiling at her across the table.

"'Tales from the Vienna Woods.'" The butter was made in curving shapes, calla lilies, roses, baskets of flowers.

"My grandfather came from Austria." She'd been shy, then, afraid of making mistakes. Getting acquainted.

"And your name is Kathleen. You're an international complication."

Yes, she was a complication. The shock troops had moved up. How tactfully they had inquired into her background. Aunt Caroline and Aunt Eloise, Don's mother, the cousins. How unhappy she'd been in that lovely guest room. She remembered the carving on the four-posted bed, the design in the woven counterpane, the linen pillow slip wet with tears. That had been the worst. No, the afternoon Mother had planned the party for "Don's folks" and they hadn't come. Standing beside the hedge of Christmas trees. The spicy fragrance had made her think of Christmas Eve, of a jingle sung with laughter, then, of Joe. She'd found the courage to do what she'd had to do—

Nice feeling peaceful like this—

"Joe—"

He bent toward her.

"What is it, Kathie?"

"I'm hungry," she said.

"Fine! Where shall we go?"

"Anywhere. I don't care."

He stopped at a roadside diner.

"This is a little short on style," he said.

"I'm short on style, too."

"All right, then. We'll take a chance."

They sat on stools at a counter. Joe ordered hamburgers and beer. Before them stretched a mirror decorated with a design done with soap. Between frothy swirls, like foam, she saw her face.

Foam! In the strong overhead light her face looked white and drowned. —and the *Little Mermaid* dissolved into foam.

Nonsense! The hamburgers sizzling on the grill

smelled good. She was hungry. Wonderful to be hungry. Her hand moved and the charm bracelet Joe gave her for Christmas tinkled against porcelain. She unfastened the catch.

"Joe," she asked, "will you do something for me?"

"Sure. What?"

"Pry off this one, the mermaid," she said.

He looked astonished. "Now?" he asked.

"This minute."

"All right."

He opened his knife and, using the small blade, worked at the ring which held the charm to the links of the bracelet. Finally it came loose.

"Now what?" he asked.

She took the small gold object, held it in the palm of her hand. "If you hadn't looked like the little mermaid—" She waited. Yes, the pain was there, but subdued, like remembering pain that had gone.

"Joe, do you mind?"

"Mind what—?"

She leaned forward and dropped the charm behind the counter. It made no sound as it fell.

"Why did you do that?"

"I'll tell you—sometime."

He seemed satisfied.

"Okay," he said.



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